
A Step into The Past

Book 17

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Chapter 01

Hatred Caused By Love

In their half a year apart, Xiao Pan has matured further, becoming even more adept at hiding his feelings.

Leaving the commander-in-chief's residence, Xiang Shaolong followed Xiao Pan back to the palace. Teng Yi, Ji Yanran and the rest returned to the Wu residence. Lu Gong's funeral arrangements would be arranged by the ceremonial official appointed by Xiao Pan.

They entered the study. When Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong had been left alone, Xiao Pan slapped the table and said in fury: "Ten thousand deaths is not enough to atone for this traitor's guilt."

Xiang Shaolong sat down forlornly beneath him and said somberly: "Why was Xu Xian sent to Shouchun?"

Xiao Pan appeared fearful of being blamed and explained: "Lu Buwei had exhorted me to ally with Chu and Qi to attack the three Jin states. He persisted in asking for Xu Xian to travel to Chu to repair relations and even wanted me to take a Chu princess as my wife. Empress Dowager could have been confused by Lao Ai as she strongly supported Lu Buwei together with Wang Wan, Cai Ze and the others. I was not able to resist them and had no choice but to agree. At that time I thought that Lu Buwei only wanted to keep Xu Xian away from Xianyang for a period of time to deter Lu Gong from

harassing him. Who would know that the Chu people would be so reckless, actually daring to assassinate the envoy who was representing me.

For the first time, Xiang Shaolong felt hatred for Zhu Ji. He was pained to silence.

Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang Chi had always been the three pillars of the military. Now only Wang Chi remained. Worse, this person was close to Lu Buwei. The status quo he had painstakingly created had been destroyed overnight.

Presently, amongst the military and the government heavyweights, he could barely count on one person Wang Ling to be on their side. The rest like Meng Ao were part of Lu Buwei's inner circle. Du Bi too had ulterior motives. This was the most precarious situation he had encountered since coming to Qin.

Xiao Pan sighed and said: "The biggest headache now is the vacant Left Premier's post left behind by Xu Xian. Lu Buwei has recommended Wang Wan, and Empress Dowager is leaning towards this proposition. It is very difficult for me to object. In terms of experience and seniority, no one besides Cai Ze is more qualified than he is to become the Left Premier."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "This matter is critical. No matter what we do, we must not let the Left Premier position fall into the hands of Lu Buwei's men, else the Qin court will be safely in Lu Buwei's pocket within three years."

He turned towards Xiao Pan and queried: "Does Crown Prince have a candidate in mind?"

Xiao Pan replied: "If it was up to be, I would go against convention and promote Li Si. He is ten times as talented as Wang Wan."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said: "Going by ability, there is no problem with Li Si, but he is not a native of Qin. Even if no one objects, you should not promote an outsider thus before you have stabilized your own position. This will only put you at odds with the Qin community."

Xiao Pan was silent for a while before nodding his head, saying: "Master is right. We should not do so at present. Ai! Its good that you are back! Finally there is someone to help me think through plans."

Xiang Shaolong gazed at Xiao Pan for a while before saying: "You have already done very well to drag things up to this point."

He stood up and started pacing, but his mind remained a blank. He mumbled: "The candidate must first be a Qin native, and then must be someone we trust absolutely. The next criterion must be that he is young and have high ideals, so as not to be easily bribed by Lu Buwei. At the same time, he must clearly understand our relationship with Lu Buwei and must also have the support of the military. Where can we find this person?"

Xiao Pan sighed and said: "This person is you my Master. But I already know that you will refuse."

Xiang Shaolong jumped once and said: "I know! This person is Lord Changping!"

Xiao Pan was startled for a while before cupping his head and saying: "Isn't he a little soft?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "Of course he's a little soft. But this tactic is called 'feigning one thing and doing another'*. The feint is Lord Changping. The real person in the shadows is Li Si. Lord Changping is a noble kinsman of the King. Even Wang Wan will find it difficult not to give in to him!"

* The actual phrase used here is 'Openly repairing the plank road while secretly crossing the river Wei at Chencang'. Its a reference to a stratagem used by Liu Bang in 206BC against Xiangyu of Chu (reference from MDBG.net). Its meaning is close to what is written above 'feigning one thing and doing another'.

Xiao Pan asked in bafflement: "I understand what 'repairing the plank road' means, but what the heck is Chencang?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly berated himself for slipping once again. This is because this incident would only happen during Chu and Han's conflict many years later. Xiao Pan had naturally never heard of it. He could only invent some nonsense, saying: "That refers to an obsolete and unused warehouse that nobody notices**. In short, Li Si is the true Premier while Lord Changping is the figurehead."

Xiao Pan was still hesitant and pointed out in doubt: "Lord Changping's treasured sister is very close to Guan Zhongxie. If Yingying is married to Guan Zhongxie, won't that present some problems?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "This might have been a problem previously, but now as long as the Changping brothers know that Xu Xian was murdered by Lu Buwei, it would be useless for him even if Guan Zhongxie marries their mother."

Xiao Pan laughed bitterly from his belly and said: "Master should not provoke me, this is not the time to be laughing."

As Xiang Shaolong thought about Xu Xian and Lu Gong, his enthusiasm diminished and he said solemnly: "This is but the first step. The second step is to recall Wang Jian and use him to counter Wang Chi, Meng Ao and Du Bi. I am sure that he will become the cornerstone of our Great Qin's military someday. Throwing in Huan Qi and Wang Ling, they will be even more formidable than Xu Xian and Lu Gong."

Xiao Pan stood up abruptly and replied: "How do we get past the Empress Dowager? She is sure to reject this because of Lord Changping's lack of experience."

Xiang Shaolong thought for an instant before saying confidently: "Allow me to persuade her personally."

Xiao Pan shook his head and cautioned: "Empress Dowager is no longer the Queen mother of last time. After Lao Ai obtained her favor, Empress Dowager has become even more infatuated with him. She also feels that I am becoming less obedient to her. I believe that Master's influence over her is no longer what it used to be. Also, Lu Buwei has been courting Lao Ai, else mother would not be supporting him."

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "Then I should speak to Lao Ai! I cannot believe that he would be willing to allow Lu Buwei to become more powerful. Now that I am back, he is no longer alone. He should now have the guts to betray Lu Buwei."

Xiao Pan nodded and said: "Let's do as Master says. If all our methods fail, we can just summon Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie into the palace and have Master kill them with the sword once and for all. After that we can trump up some charge and pick up the pieces."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and replied: "What kind of plan is this? The bulk of the military strength is now with Meng Ao. If we do this, the outcome would be unpredictable. Moreover the palace is steeped with Lu Buwei's spies. If anything goes wrong, we will be the ones to lose out."

Xiao Pan sighed and was speechless.

Xiang Shaolong remembered Prince Dan and asked about his situation.

Xiao Pan nonchalantly replied: "Lu Buwei has invited him to his new official residence and detained him there. It is unknown whether he is alive or dead. His subordinates have been placed under house arrest in the guesthouse. They are not allowed to step out of the gates. Guan Zhongxie's men are guarding the place. I did not feel that this was a big deal and I had too many things to worry about, hence I did not get involved."

Xiang Shaolong beheld him in astonishment, trepidation rising from the bottom of his heart.

Qin Shihuang is Qin Shihuang after all, promoting expedience while discounting benevolence and righteousness. Just based on Xiao Pan's manner, one could tell that he had no qualms about having Lu Buwei kill Prince Dan. This would after all remove one of the obstacles in the way of his future unification of China.

As he reflected on this, he realized that to move Xiao Pan in this matter, he would have to appeal to benefit.

After he thought for a while, he heaved a long sigh and said: "Doing this, Crown Prince is actually elevating the other party and putting himself down."

Xiao Pan stared blankly for a while and said: "So even this a problem?"

Xiang Shaolong forthrightly said: "If Crown Prince remains aloof on this matter, the prestige that Crown Prince painstakingly created by quelling the rebellion at the royal hunt will dissipate, causing people to think that the only one in charge in Xianyang is that stinking Premier Mentor Lu Buwei. It is said that when two countries battle, envoys are not to be harmed. Prince Dan has come from afar to attend the funeral of your late father. He has been seized by Lu Buwei, but the charge will be leveled at you. Will the Eastern six kingdoms trust you in the future if you do not observe righteousness and justice? "

Xiao Pan was startled and said: "Why does Master sing the same tune as Li Si? Looks like there is some reason there. But what if Prince Dan has already been killed by Lu Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and replied: "How could Lu Buwei be so willing to kill Prince Dan? This matter is clearly directed at me. On the other hand, it is also to help that devil Tian Dan defeat Yan."

He paused for a while before giving a cold snort, saying: "Mo Ao was killed publicly by me, removing the old scoundrel's chief tactician. Worse, his prestige was damaged. As someone who is paranoid about winning, how could he swallow this? Still he did not have a way to deal with us directly. His only method was to use Prince Dan. At the most I would barge into the residence demanding the person. He would then be able to kill me or stick some charge on me."

Xiao Pan coolly said: "Still, this matter had the tacit approval of mother. Lu Gong and Xu Xian voiced opposition many times but were always suppressed by mother and the scoundrel Lu. Hei! It is also difficult for me!"

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming. Xiao Pan was right. Zhu Ji has definitely changed a lot this half a year.

Xiao Pan said: "From tomorrow, Master must attend the morning court. Ai! The number of people who dare to oppose Lu Buwei are diminishing by the day."

He paused and then continued: "Is there anyway to recall An Gu?"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and said: "The bulk of our Great Qin's military strength is now concentrated at the border. The seven cities are in the hands of Meng Ao, Wang Chi and Du Bi. The rest belong to Wang Jian and An Gu. If

we recall both Wang Jian and An Gu, we will lose all out external support. This is something we must never do."

Using this as a segway, he asked: "What has come of Huan Qi's effort to build a contingency force?"

Xiao Pan was reenergized and replied: "The two of them Huan Qi and Little Ben have been traveling all over the country, personally selecting talent. They now have an army of close to ten thousand. Li Si has given this division the name 'Rapid Response Division'. It sounds appropriate."

He snorted again and said: "Nonetheless Lu Buwei has hindered Huan Qi in many ways. On the surface he agrees to everything, but in secret he opposes everything. I wanted to promote Li Si by one grade to become a minister-of-state in the government and military, but was stiffly blocked by Empress Dowager and Lu Buwei. I am unable to move a single step. Master needs to think of a plan for me."

Xiang Shaolong was vexed. He was without Xu Xian and Lu Gong while the enemy had Meng Ao and Wang Chi. He was himself unschooled in top level military and civil administration. How was he to overcome Lu Buwei?

Thinking to this point, his heart jolted, calculating that if he could swing Meng Ao over, everything would be solved. While it would be difficult to instigate Meng Ao to rebel, he had a chance because Lu Buwei had once tried to murder Meng Ao's two sons. Nonetheless he must first win over Meng Wu and Meng Tian. His heart was stirred and he had already formulated a plan.

Xiang Shaolong summed up: "The matter of utmost importance right now is to capture the position of Left Premier for our man, and then to increase Wang Jian's profile to counter the two men Meng Ao and Wang Chi. I will take care of Prince Dan personally."

They continued discussing the details especially on Prince Dan's situation before Xiang Shaolong left Xiao Pan's study.

As he stepped across the study door, he did not know where to go for a moment.

He desired most to return to the Wu residence to see Zhao Ya. Nonetheless, in the name of righteousness and justice, he needed to console Prince Dan's subordinates Xu Yize and the rest. However, the most critical person he had to talk to was actually Lao Ai, to instigate an alliance against Lu Buwei.

After a while of indecision, Li Si's voice sounded in his ear saying: "Official Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong recovered his spirit and joyfully cried: "Brother Li!"

Li Si grabbed him in one hand and led him to the imperial garden through a side door.

It was now afternoon and the sky was covered in heavy clouds, suggesting a blizzard.

As they arrived at a small pavilion, Li Si released him, sighed and said: "The

scoundrel Lu is truly formidable. After a few moves, we are now at a great disadvantage again. Hei! Has Tian Dan been killed?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head.

Li Si's eyes brightened and he said excitedly: "This is greatly beneficial to Great Qin's future plans to unify the world. And Lu Buwei can no longer count on his mutual support to control the six Eastern states."

Xiang Shaolong seized the opportunity to ask: "Besides the military's Meng Ao and Wang Chi, what kind of strength does Lu Buwei have?"

Li Si replied forlornly: "Lu Buwei has comparatively weak troops-wise. At least within Xianyang, our strength is superior to his."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his eyebrows and said: "I am unfamiliar with the court process, can Brother Li explain its ins and outs to me?"

Li Si looked at him in shock for a while before nodding his head and saying: "If you need a detailed explanation, I am afraid that Official Xiang will not be able to return home tonight. At a high level however, there are three levels in the hierarchy. At the top is naturally the Crown Prince together with supporting minor officials like me. We form the inner court. Hei! Just the inner court is extremely complex."

Xiang Shaolong replied: "I am actually familiar with the inner court. Brother Li does not need to explain. Under the Crown Prince is the Right Premier and Left Premier. What is the difference in authority between the two?"

Li Si patiently explained: "To answer this, we need to start with Shang Yang's political reforms during the time of Duke Xiao. Then, the two highest officials under the monarch were the Commons Chief and the Grand Vizier***. Until King Huiwen came, Shang Yang held both positions, effectively unifying the control of the military and civil government in one person. His achievements were spectacular, arousing even the jealousy of his master King Huiwen who finally executed him through dismemberment by horses. From then on, power was concentrated in the King. The civil government and military was separated, with a Premier installed to manage the former and a Great General to command the latter. The Premier headed hundreds of officials. The administrative load on him became too heavy and the post was divided into the Left and Right Premiers, with the Right Premier managing the civil government and the Left Premier managing military affairs. The former was akin to the previous Commons Chief and the latter akin to the Grand Vizier."

The more Xiang Shaolong listened, the more confused he got. He asked: "If that is so, why is Lu Buwei so insistent on controlling the military?"

Li Si laughed bitterly and replied: "It has always been difficult to separate the civil government and the military. Since both the Left and Right Premiers report directly to the King, whenever there is a decision to be made by the King, both Premiers must be consulted. Now with the Crown Prince still young and the Empress Dowager personally holding court. The situation is even more complex."

Xiang Shaolong felt even more confused and frowned, asking: "In that case, how do these two Premiers operate?"

Li Si languidly replied: "The Left and Right Premiers govern the country though the four institutions. The four institutions are the Army and Government, the Judiciary, the Tax Authority and Public Works. They are controlled by the four cabinet ministers, the Minister of War, Minister of Justice, Minister of Education and Minister of the Sky. Presently the Left Premier manages the Military and Public Works while the Right Premier manages the Judiciary and Tax Authority. Lu Gong was originally the Minister of War. This position is now glaringly vacant."

Xiang Shaolong was about to query some more when an inner palace attendant arrived outside the hall, greeted and announced: "The Empress Dowager requests the pleasure of seeing Official Xiang!"

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si glanced at each other, both realizing something was wrong.

Thick snow started floating down at this moment.

Inside the Empress Dowager's inner palace, Zhu Ji was sitting high atop the phoenix dais. Four palace maids and four servants stood at her left and right. Palace guards lined up on both sides up to the entrance of the palace hall.

The moment Xiang Shaolong saw this troop arrangement, he knew that he was at a disadvantage. This is because Zhu Ji is clearly indicating that she did not want to engage in private conversation. She is also indicating that her heart is with Lao Ai, since she is demonstrating that she does not want to meet him alone, avoiding Lao Ai's jealousy.

Indeed, after Xiang Shaolong had paid his respects and recovered, Zhu Ji looked at him with chilly eyes and coldly said: "Official Xiang, are you disregarding me the Empress Dowager? Returning after half a year, you do not even meet me for a greeting."

Xiang Shaolong knew that the only effective move was to use the soft to overcome the hard. He sighed and said: "Empress Dowager, please calm down. The reason....."

Zhu Ji interrupted him, saying: "No matter what you say, I am not going to calm down. Xiang Shaolong, tell me what you and Crown Prince are stirring. You are so secretive and sneaky in everything, keeping me in the dark. When Lord Gaoling rebelled during the hunt, you clearly had prior information. Why didn't you inform me?"

At this point Xiang Shaolong knew she was merely sore about an old issue, so he laughed bitterly and said: "This minor official has a thousand things to say, but finds it difficult to say a word with so many ears listening. Is it right for me to speak so freely of the Late King or the Crown Prince or Premier Lu or Premier Xu?"

Zhu Ji's beautiful eyes gazed at him deeply for a time. She then softened and heaved a sigh, saying: "Alright! Everyone please get out. Anyone who dares to eavesdrop is to be killed without mercy."

In the blink of an eye, all the servants and guards had cleared out of the hall, even closing the palace hall door and all the side doors.

The Zhu Ji who was sitting on the phoenix seat heaved another sigh and with a softened voice said: "I already knew it was impossible to corner you. Speak!"

Xiang Shaolong took two steps forward and bracing himself, sat on the steps of the dais. He blandly said: "Lu Buwei killed Xu Xian and harmed Lu Gong. If he is able to kill me, the next will be Official Lao."

Zhu Ji saw that he was actually so rude as to sit on the steps of the dais on his own accord. She had wanted to reprimand him, but was overwhelmed by his startling words. She shook dramatically, saying: "What did you say?"

Xiang Shaolong buried his head in his palms and said solemnly: "Any obstacle in Lu Buwei's path to power will be kicked away by him sooner or later. He can sacrifice anyone and anything other than himself. Empress Dowager should understand this even better than I do."

Zhu Ji's breathing became heavy and only said after a long while: "The Chu people have sent the severed head of Lord Chunshen over, begging for forgiveness over Xu Xian's death. What does this have to do with Lu Buwei? If you do not make yourself clear, I will not spare you."

Xiang Shaolong became furious and whipped his body around sharply, staring at Zhu Ji. He said: "What did Lord Chunshen stand to gain by killing Xu Xian? If not for Tian Dan's instigation and Lu Buwei's background support, even if there was much to benefit from it, would the Chu people be so audacious? Heng! You will not spare me? Just get someone to come and behead me then. See if I Xiang Shaolong will crease half a hair on my eyebrow."

Zhu Ji's eyes emitted an intensely cold killing aura, but after contending a time with his gaze, she was defeated. She lowered her gaze and lightly said: "Just take it as if my words were too extreme. What's the use of getting so angry?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that it was a good chance to back down, but decided to vent his anger anyway. He said forcefully: "The position of Left Premier is now being coveted by everyone. If it falls onto Lu Buwei's hands, not only will I Xiang Shaolong die without a proper burial, the person beside Empress Dowager will not live to his old age."

Zhu Ji gently said: "If Shaolong is willing to be the Left Premier, I will support him with all my power."

Xiang Shaolong regained his calm and smiled while shaking his head, saying: "It is not for me, but for Lord Changping."

Zhu Ji was startled and objected: "How would the people accept Lord Changping? Why don't you consider Wang Ling?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "This is because we need Wang Ling to replace Lu Gong in managing the Army, to better master Wang Chi, Meng Ao, Du Bi and their men. Even though Lord Changping is a little lacking in virtue and seniority, he is still a scion of the royal family. Appointing him as Premier is the best way to pacify the hearts of Great Qin's military. Empress Dowager should remember that two of the three tiger generals of Western Qin have gone. The remaining one Wang Chi is not only leaning towards Lu Buwei, his standing is still below that of Meng Ao. Now everyone is currying favor with

Lu Buwei. When everyone has fallen in with him, will Empress Dowager and Crown Prince have a place to stand?"

Zhu Ji stared at him for a while before saying forlornly: "Why can't I ever prevail over you? But this is no small matter. I need to mull on this. Please retire first!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that she was going to discuss this with Lao Ai and cringed in his heart. Still, he could not do a thing and left in frustration.

Chapter 02

Block and Counter

Lao Ai's residence is beside the palace. Just across and looking as magnificent as a mini-palace is Lu Buwei's new den of thieves. The outer wall is tall and thick and the entrance is framed by thirty-foot high stone archway. The three large words 'Premier Mentor's Residence' were inscribed in stone. This brazen act of strife with the King's prestige is enough to arouse the kind of jealousy that King Huiwen had for Shang Yang. Provoking the jealousy of Xiao Pan the future Qin Shihuang will undoubtedly be his downfall, it is just a pity that that will only happen in six years.

To endure and survive this six bitter and treacherous years, he would have to feign humility and friendship with the crafty Lao Ai.

In that movie about Qin Shihuang, Zhu Ji finally stands completely on Lao Ai's side, not only opposing Lu Buwei but also secretly plotting the overthrow of her son Yin Zheng.

The movie's explanation was grossly simplified, attributing it all to Zhu Ji's infatuation with Lao Ai.

But Xiang Shaolong knew that there were at least two other reasons. The first reason was her unrequited love for Xiao Pan and himself turning into hate.

The other reason is even more complicated.

Xiang Shaolong was actually abiding by the irresistible will of fate. That is why he deliberately allowed Zhu Ji to succumb increasingly and more inextricably into Lao Ai's lustful manipulation.

Because he felt guilty, and also knew that Zhu Ji was no longer able to leave Lao Ai, he subconsciously alienated himself from her, increasing her hatred for him. That is how things have ended up this way today.

Xiao Pan had always looked up to Zhu Ji as his mother, taking her as a natural replacement for Madam Ni. Thus he had also wished that she would remain chaste like Madam Ni. In the depths of his heart, other than King Zhuangxiang, he could only accept Xiang Shaolong as his father. Zhu Ji's standing in his eyes has taken a tumble since she became attached to the disreputable Lao Ai, seeming to have lost her self respect. This disappointment caused more than a minor change in his attitude, it has in fact has turned into an intense loathing and hatred. This is in turn causing their relationship to become increasingly vile.

Under these circumstances, Zhu Ji naturally leaned closer to Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

It seemed to her as if Xao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were colluding against her.

This is a situation and a fact that nobody can change.

Xiang Shaolong's only resort was to incite conflict between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei, causing Zhu Ji to support only Lao Ai and not Lu Buwei.

He arrived at Lao Ai's inner residence and reported his name. Lao Ai received the news and happily came out to welcome him.

This scoundrel with the heart of a beast was decked in court dress, looking rejuvenated and in high spirits. While he was still at a distance, he smiled and greeted: "The news is that Official Xiang has returned from his long journey. I was just thinking of visiting to pay my respects. Who would have guessed that the Official would honor us with a visit. How could the lesser official bear this?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed his mother because she gave birth to such a heartless thief. But of course he managed his expression carefully and went up to meet up. He pulled his arm and laughed, saying: "I just met Empress Dowager and the Crown Prince and found out that so much has happened in Xianyang. Come! Let us find a place to have a heart to heart chat."

Lao Ai clearly knew about his meeting with the Empress Dowager and indifferently led him into the East room. Along the way, he saw numerous maids and household warriors. His grandeur seemed to be rising.

After they had sat down and had a cup of fragrant tea, with the maids had withdrawn, Lao Ai said: "What confidential matter did Empress Dowager and Official Xiang discuss?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was most jealous of the unrequited feelings that Zhu Ji had for him. If he could not allay his suspicion, he could forget about corporation. He whispered: "I told Empress Dowager that Xu Xian was killed by Lord Chunshen under orders from Lu Buwei."

Lao Ai looked at him in shock.

Xiang Shaolong explained concisely and exclaimed again: "If the post of Left Premier falls into the hands of Lu Buwei's men, even the Crown Prince and Empress Dowager will have no choice but to be led by the nose."

Lao Ai was stumped for words and started contemplating.

This was Xiang Shaolong's brilliance. Truth be told, Lao Ai had large ambitions. And his only means was to rely on Zhu Ji.

If Zhu Ji loses power, not only would his own per wane, he would have to return to living on Lu Buwei's grace.

Human beings were thus. Before tasting the sweetness, all is good. But after tasting the sweetness, it would be hard to give it up. If Lao Ai had to return to being Lu Buwei's slave, it would be more unbearable than killing him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled and said: "If I guessed correctly, Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie must have exhausted all means to win Official Lao over, just like how he won me over previously."

Lao Ai glanced at him and asked: "Please forgive the Lao's query, but why did Official Xiang favour me from the beginning?"

Xiang Shaolong squeezed out his most earnest expression and replied: "I can reveal this matter only to Brother Lao alone. The reason is the Empress Dowager. Crown Prince and I did not want her to feel lonely, plus I have

always been fond of Brother Lao. Brother Lao should understand my intentions now!"

Lao Ai couldn't help asking: "Is Brother Xiang wishing that I will support your appointment as Left Premier?"

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed him for projecting his petty thinking onto the noble intentions of others. He forced an expression as if he did not want to be misunderstood and angrily replied: "If I had wanted to be Left Premier, I would have been while the Late King was still around. Brother Lao should know about this matter right?"

Of course Lao Ai knew about this and he hurriedly apologized: "Brother Xiang, please do not misunderstand. I was just thinking that apart from you, who else would be qualified to contend with Wang Wan?"

Xiang Shaolong knew he had been moved, and heaving a sigh, he said: "Please allow me to change the topic for a while. It is said that 'men are not grass and trees, how can they be emotionless?'. I Xiang Shaolong personally brought the Empress Dowager and Crown Prince to Qin. I had originally intended to return to obscurity then to enjoy a peaceful rural life with my lovely wives and beautiful maids. This is truly my dream. How was I to know that this old scoundrel Lu Buwei repeatedly tried to kill me, even causing my wife and maids to die tragically. This is why I want to fight Lu Buwei to the end. The day the Lu scoundrel is killed will also be the day I Xiang Shaolong leave Qin. If this is not the case, may heaven exterminate me. Does Brother Lao understand my intent now?"

Lao Ai stared at him for a moment before stretching his hand and saying: "I understand!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he had been thoroughly moved and stretched out his own hand for the handshake. He then solemnly said: "Lord Changping to be the Left Premier, Wang Ling to replace Lu Gong. Does Brother Lao agree?"

Lao Ai exclaimed hoarsely: "What?!"

After Xiang Shaolong left Lao Ai's residence, he led the eighteen guardians to the heavily guarded guest house of Prince Dan. More than ten of the city guards immediately blocked the route to the entrance. The leading city guard captain saluted and said: "Official Guan has ordered that nobody is to enter the house."

Xiang Shaolong glanced at him sideways and barked: "You've seen me Xiang Shaolong yet you dare to obstruct me so rudely. What is your name?"

That guard captain knew then and there that he was in big trouble. He knelt down in fright and pleaded: "Your humble servant knows his guilt! Your humble servant knows his guilt! For a moment I did not see clearly that it was Commander Xiang."

It could be said that, there was no one in Xianyang at present who did not know that Xiang Shaolong was the anointed man closest to the Crown Prince. If he wanted to act against some small fry, even Lu Buwei would not be able to prevent it. The guards were so frightened that they all knelt down.

How would Xiang Shaolong trifle with them? He shouted coldly: "Open the door for me!"

How would the guards dare to object? They obediently opened the gate. It turned out that there was another group of guards encamped in the square within the residence.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse and instructed his guardians to keep watch at the gate. He then swaggered into the residence with high and mighty steps. The city guards were intimidated by his mighty aura and dared not utter a word.

There were more than ten of Prince Dan's experts inside, including the Great General Xu Yize, Minister-of-State Leng Ting, Division Commander You Zhi, and the Yan Du who was defeated by Guan Zhongxie. When they heard his voice, they went to the residence gate to welcome him.

When they saw Xiang Shaolong, they all had an expression of grief and indignation.

After they had reached the main hall and sat down, Xu Yize indignantly said: "Official Xiang must arbitrate for us."

You Zi was the cool-headed one. He asked: "Did you manage to dispose of Tian Dan?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head in affirmation.

Xu Yize and the rest all breathed a little easier.

Truth be told, if Tian Dan was still alive, Yan would be in mortal danger.

Leng Ting heaved a sigh and said: "How could anyone predict that Lu Buwei would dare to defy public opinion and detain the Crown Prince (Dan). We do not know if Crown Prince (Dan) is alive or dead so we dare not act. Else even if we are all killed in battle, we will want to vent our anger."

Xiang Shaolong said: "Gentlemen, please be at ease. Even if one day Lu Buwei grew some balls, he would not dare to injure the Crown Prince (Dan). Else he would have broken faith with the world. I think he has just promised to detain Crown Prince (Dan) for a time to allow the devil Tian Dan to satisfy his wicked desires! Leave this matter to me. If I cannot openly compel him to release Crown Prince (Dan), I will rescue him in secret. Alright! Please pack your belongings and come to my residence. The Lu thief will have to release Crown Prince (Dan), but may turn to murdering all of you instead. That would be a disaster."

Xu Yize saw that Xiang Shaolong was loyal and righteous without regard for Lu Buwei. He couldn't help but be moved and ordered his men to pack their items immediately.

In a short while, more than a hundred people had assembled in the parade square. The city guards in charge looked on helplessly. Nobody dared to interfere.

At this moment, the sound of hoofbeats arrived. A company of men and

horses galloped in from the main gate. They were led by Guan Zhongxie.

His expression was chilly. He quickly dismounted and came up to Xiang Shaolong. In a bold and self-righteous tone, he said: "Official Xiang please wait. Your subordinate has been ordered by the Premier Mentor to forbid the occupants of the residence from stepping past the gate."

Xu Yize and the rest all drew their swords. Under the reflection of the blades, the tension mounted.

Xiang Shaolong laughed aloud and said: "Could I ask if Official Guan has any official document signed by the Premier Mentor or any such thing?"

Guan Zhongxie was stumped on the spot.

As soon as he had received the news from his subordinates that Xiang Shaolong had run the barricade, he had rushed over from the command building immediately. He could not have had the opportunity to meet with Lu Buwei. He said forcefully: "Subordinate has received Premier Mentor's verbal orders. If Official Xiang does not believe me, he may inquire of Premier Mentor personally."

Xiang Shaolong drew his sword with a "Qiang" sound. He laughed and said: "Then I also have Crown Prince's verbal orders to come here to retrieve the people. If Official Guan does not believe me, he can inquire of the Crown Prince personally. If anyone dares to hinder me, he is disobeying the King's order. I will kill without mercy."

All the guardians drew their swords as one, tightly encircling Guan Zhongxie and his ten plus bodyguards.

Guan Zhongxie's expression changed slightly, knowing that if he said anything more in contradiction, blood would be drawn then and there.

He looked at his underlings on the outside. Their faces were pale as clay and they were keeping quiet out of fear. For sure if a fight broke out, none of them would dare to get involved.

He then looked at Xiang Shaolong and saw the murderous spirit in his eyes. It was clear that Xiang Shaolong intended to use this opportunity to eliminate him. 'A gentleman does not mind backing down for a while to achieve a larger purpose'. He smiled and retreated to one side, flatly saying: "Official Xiang has misunderstood. Subordinate was just afraid that the Official has just returned from afar and does not know the present situation. Since this is the case, we'll let Premier Mentor take this up with the Crown Prince then. Official, please!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly lamented that was a pity and sheathed his sword. He smiled and said: "That would be the best. I had thought that Official Guan was disobedient even to the Crown Prince, being loyal only to the Premier Mentor."

Guan Zhongxie felt a stab of fear, recalling that Lu Buwei's greatest weakness was that ultimately he was not the Qin King. That is why as long as the Qin Crown Prince had Xiang Shaolong's backing, he had to obey the King's orders unless he chose to rebel openly.

Xu Yize and all the guardians sheathed their swords and mounted their horses.

Xiang Shaolong did not even spare Guan Zhongxie a glance, leading everyone out through the gates. He suddenly thought of a contingency, and after instructing Wu Shu to bring Xu Yize and the rest back to the Wu residence, headed for the palace immediately with his men. When he entered the inner courtyard, he found Xiao Pan discussing court business with Li Si. He greeted and said: "If Crown Prince wishes to demolish the Lu thief's prestige and increase your monarchical power, a golden opportunity is before you."

Xiao Pan and Li Si were astonished, both looking at each other.

As the Crown Prince commanded for the inspection tour to proceed, more than a hundred mounted guards set forth, clearing the way for him. Lord Changwen, Lord Changping, Xiang Shaolong and Li Si formed up at the Crown Prince's front, back, left and right. More than three hundred men and horses galloped out of the palace in splendor and might, heading towards the Premier Mentor's residence.

At this moment, Lu Buwei was furiously rushing out of the Premier Mentor's residence as he had just been informed by Guan Zhongxie of Xiang Shaolong's rescue of Prince Dan's men. He was going to the palace to get Zhu Ji to call Xiang Shaolong to account. How was he to know that he would meet the sovereign en route.

Guan Zhongxie and the rest hurriedly moved to the side and knelt down. Only Lu Buwei urged his horse forward to Xiao Pan's front. After greeting

Xiao Pan, he first gave Xiang Shaolong a glance before gravely asking: "Where is Crown Prince going for his inspection tour and why?"

Xiao Pan secretly cursed him: Since when is it your turn to mind my business? Nonetheless he maintained an unhurried expression on the surface and replied: "I was just going to the Premier Mentor's residence."

Lu Buwei replied in shock: "Why is Crown Prince looking for the old official?"

Xiao Pan blandly replied: "It is said that Prince Dan has gone to Premier Mentor's residence and is lingering there. I have a sudden urge to meet him. Will Premier Mentor please arrange a meeting between us immediately."

Lu Buwei stared foolishly for a while before his eyes betrayed a cold murderous look. He coldly said: "Prince Dan had expressed a desire to leave over the past few days. I do not know if he is still within the old official's residence." He turned his head towards the kneeling Guan Zhongxie and shouted loudly: "Commander Guan, why haven't you quickly gone and checked it out for the Crown Prince?"

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong exchanged a glance before the former sneered: "Premier Mentor's words are strange. Don't you even know if someone is at your residence? To be sure, Prince Dan has arrived from afar to offer sacrifices to the Late King. He is our Great Qin's honored guest. If our hospitality is not satisfactory, even I have to bear some responsibility."

He then shouted: "Changping, Changwen! The two of you will accompany Official Guan to verify the outcome!"

Lu Buwei did not imagine that after Xiang Shaolong returned, Xiao Pan would turn into a completely different person. Not only did he not abide by his wishes, he seemed to be putting him down at every point. While he was still dumbstruck, Lord Changping and Lord Changwen had clasped Guan Zhongxie between them and left.

Xiao Pan nudged his horse's belly and rode towards the Premier Mentor's residence. The large contingent of men and horses continued forward. Lu Buwei could only follow at Xiao Pan's side.

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan and Li Si were all laughing in their hearts. Lu Buwei's greatest disadvantage this time was that he had no logic to stand on. That was why it was best for him to remain mute and swallow the bitter medicine, keeping his pain to himself.

All the citizens stopped and bowed on the streetside at the sight of the Crown Prince on his inspection tour. All paid obeisance to this youthful heir-apparent whose martial prowess was rising with each day.

Before they had reached the Premier Mentor's residence, both Lords Changping and Changwen had come out with a pale Prince Dan in between.

Xiao Pan urged his horse forward and laughed loudly, saying: "Prince Dan, how are you doing? Will the Prince please generously excuse our poor hospitality and forgive us our multitude of mistakes!"

When Prince Dan saw Xiang Shaolong, how could he not know what was happening? After he said a few polite words, he turned to the ashen-faced Lu

Buwei and said: "One of these days, I will definitely repay the Premier Mentor for this half a year of hospitality."

Lu Buwei knew that he was speaking in irony and coldly snorted without replying. He could not even be bothered to put up an act at this point.

Xiao Pan turned to Lu Buwei and said: "Wasn't Premier Mentor going to the palace? Was it to meet the Empress Dowager or myself?"

Lu Buwei was almost shocked to silence. Who would have thought that Xiao Pan would be so formidable. If he had said that he wanted to meet with Zhu Ji, it would clearly show that he wanted to mess with the Crown Prince in front of her. If he said he wanted to meet him instead, what else was there to say? He awkwardly said: "The old official merely wanted to discuss the candidates for the posts of Left Premier and Minister of War with Crown Prince and Empress Dowager!"

Xiao Pan coldly said: "I have made my decision. It will be announced during morning court tomorrow. This matter need not be discussed further. Premier Mentor, please!"

Lu Buwei looked at Xiang Shaolong in shock.

Xiang Shaolong smiled faintly and without saying anything, displayed a look of profound mystery. He secretly laughed that Lu Buwei has finally experienced the domineering and oppressive air of this future Qin Shihuang.

As Lu Buwei was fuming over this, Xiao Pan ordered: "I just remembered

something. I am not able to stay for long. Official Xiang will entertain Prince Dan properly on my behalf. I wish to return to the palace."

He nudged his horse and left.

Lord Changping, Lord Changwen, Li Si and the rest hurriedly followed.

Xiang Shaolong saw Lu Buwei staring at Xiao Pan's back in a daze and he said indifferently: "Premier Mentor, please! This General will now retire!"

Ignoring Lu Buwei, he led Prince Dan and all the guardians away. He knew that this incident marked the start of his open war with Lu Buwei. There would be no other option.

They passed by Qin Qing's residence on the way back to the Wu residence. He almost wanted to slip in for a tryst with this beautiful widow. Nonetheless he had Prince Dan at his side, and Madam Ya, Wu Tingfang and the rest were also hanging on for his return. It was best for him to suppress this urge.

Chapter 03

A Final Farewell

Xiang Shaolong returned to the Wu residence with Prince Dan. Even in their wildest dreams, Xu Yize and his party could not imagine that their master would be rescued in such a short time. They were all celebrating madly and grateful to tears. Xiang Shaolong was worried about Zhao Ya, Wu Tingfang, Bao'er and the rest, and so handed the task of entertaining Prince Dan to Tao Fang and Teng Yi with an apology. He hurriedly walked towards the inner residence. The servants and maids he met were all excited at his return and greeted him respectfully.

As he walked through the winding covered walkways around the garden, he heard a male and female voice in conversation from the little pavilion behind a bamboo grove. Nonetheless he could not make out who they were.

He did not have the mood to investigate and kept walking. As his footsteps sounded, a woman's voice called out delicately from the bamboo grove: "Master is back!"

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and looked over. Turns out it was Zhou Wei. Her face was fuller, perhaps because of the comfortable life here. This caused her to be even more enchanting than before. She prostrated herself on the ground, her face blushing awkwardly with a flustered expression.

As Xiang Shaolong was wondering who she was talking to, a shadow flashed

by and the Wu Guo who had brought Zhao Ya back from Daliang came out after her from the bamboo grove. He even called out: "Little Wei you! Oh! Master Xiang! Your servant! Hei!" He knelt down beside Zhou Wei, his expression also awkward and embarrassed.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized, figuring that Wu Guo this rascal had fallen for Zhou Wei and was currently putting in effort to woo her.

While he had once encouraged Jing Jun to pursue her, it seems that Jing Jun had turned his sights to Lu Dan'er. That is why he has allowed Wu Guo this lovable little rascal to plot his amorous pursuit. He was most happy.

Zhou Wei saw that Wu Guo was almost touching her shoulder to shoulder as he knelt down. She glared at Wu Guo before fretfully saying: "Master, Little Wei." Xiang Shaolong hurried forward and helped the two of them up, happily saying: "Little Wei need not explain. Seeing the two of you together, I have only happiness. How could I blame you for anything?"

Zhou Wei's pretty face blushed a deep red and she hung her head, saying: "Master, its not like that!"

Xiang Shaolong noticed that she did not dare to look at him as she spoke, how could he not understand that she did indeed have some affection for Wu Guo. As he was about to speak, Wu Guo jumped up and in the midst of joyous shouting flipped a somersault before grabbing Zhou Wei's jade arms and shaking it, saying: "Little Wei, what I said was correct, wasn't it! Master Xiang will not blame us for sure."

Zhou Wei shook free of his grasp and angrily scolded him: "Get lost for me. I need to attend to Master."

Xiang Shaolong chortled a laugh and said: "Little Wei does not have to wait on me any longer. From today onwards, let Wu Guo serve you!"

The moment he finished speaking, he raised his steps and walked away, leaving Wu Guo to bandy with Zhou Wei.

As he was about to reach the rear residence, the two maids Tian Zhen and Tian Feng rushed out in in a gust of fragrant wind. They threw themselves into his embrace and cried tears of joy, looking like two beautifully trembling little birds.

Xiang Shaolong embraced the two of them tightly and entered the hall.

Wu Tingfang was having a heart-to-heart chat with Ji Yanran. The soon to be three year old Xiang Bao'er nestled in the latter's bosom.

When Wu Tingfang saw Xiang Shaolong, she forgot everything else, jumped up and pounced onto him.

Xiang Shaolong let go of the Tian Sisters and hugged her in a full embrace.

Wu Tingfang cried and complained to him at the same time: "This person you! Only now are you willing to return home." As Xiang Shaolong laughed and teased her, Ji Yanran carried Xiang Bao'er over and placed him in the crook of his arm.

Xiang Bao'er held on to his neck, his clear boyish voice calling out: "Daddy!" Xiang Shaolong was so happy that he rained kisses on his small face, his heart filled to the brim with the warmth of family affection.

Ji Yanran laughed and said: "Enough! Quickly go into the room to see Sister Ya! She should be awake by now."

Xiang Shaolong knew that Zhao Ya did not have the habit of taking afternoon naps and he jolted, asking: "How is Ya'er?"

Ji Yanran's expression turned dark and she said: "Her body is very weak. Quickly go see her! She has been waiting for you bitterly."

Xiang Shaolong returned Xiang Bao'er to Ji Yanran and smoothly asked: "Where is Zhi Zhi and Sister Rou?"

Wu Tingfang happily replied: "The three sisters are together and have no attention for anything else at the moment."

After Xiang Shaolong kissed Wu Tingfang's cheeks again, the Tian Sisters clasped him in between themselves and dragged him excitedly towards the East wing.

They entered a particularly quiet and secluded room. Zhao Ya had not awakened yet. A pretty maid was at her side nursing her.

The Tian Sisters judiciously dragged away that pretty maid. He was left alone with Zhao Ya. He sat on the edge of the couch, a heated love igniting in his

heart. He carefully examined this tragic beauty.

Zhao Ya has obviously wasted away and her appearance was wan and unhealthy. She was missing the brightness and color of her former days, and had taken on a thin and delicate look instead. As he saw this, his heart was pained.

Xiang Shaolong reached out his hands to caress her cheeks and painfully called out: "Ya'er! Ya'er!"

Zhao Ya slowly woke up. Opening her eyes, she saw that it was Xiang Shaolong and with a delicate moan, she struggled to sit up.

Xiang Shaolong embraced her into his bosom and kissed her fragrant lips deeply.

Zhao Ya used a hidden burst of energy and wrapped him up tightly like a parcel, giving him a warm and full response. She then raised her pretty face and laughed saying: "My man is finally back. Oh! Why are you crying? Even I am not crying!"

Xiang Shaolong fell on the bed and they fell asleep in mutual embrace, face to face and with one hand caressing her arousing body. He sighed: "Ya'er, you've lost weight!"

Zhao Ya kissed the tip of his nose and happily said: "I have already given consideration to your pair of naughty hands and have been forcing myself to eat something everyday. Are you still blaming me? Wu! Remember, you are

not to bring up our old grudges, not even one word."

Xiang Shaolong saw her beautiful eyes ripple with splendor and was secretly delighted, saying: "Ya'er, you must recover and accompany me for for a scenic tour, enjoy the pleasures of life without holding back."

Zhao Ya smiled and said: "My illness is incurable. But as long as I am able to spend my last days with my most beloved, Heaven does not owe me Zhao Ya anything anymore."

An intensely ominous feeling welled up in him and he reproached her saying: "I forbid you from saying such things. You are sure to recover completely. My love to you is the world's best miracle cure, stronger than any grand doctor."

Zhao Ya giggled and her pretty face twinkled. She gave him another kiss before saying: "Please help me up. I've sleep till I'm tired to death."

Xiang Shaolong actually could not bear to leave this comfortable slumber inducing couch, but did not have a choice but to cradle her up by the waist and sitting up on the couch.

Zhao Ya strove to hold on to his neck, and said weakly: "How about going out for a walk? Look! Its snowing!"

Xiang Shaolong looked out the window. Snowflakes were indeed floating down. He couldn't bear to deny her and finding a cloak and a thick cape, wrapped her up tightly before supporting her towards the small pavilion in the courtyard. He helped her onto a stone bench and said in sympathetic

love: "Is Ya'er uncomfortable anywhere?"

Zhao Ya pasted herself onto his cheeks and looked at the snow covered landscape outside the pavilion. She smiled and said: "Are you talking about the past? I feel completely devoid of energy. I will feel dizzy whether sitting or standing. Sometimes when I think of you, my heart will ache. But everything is alright now. I even feel like eating something!"

Xiang Shaolong leaned away and asked: "Should I get someone to prepare some food for you? What would you like to eat?"

Zhao Ya's eyes emitted a passion deep as the sea, and with a smile on her face, she shook her head saying: "No! That was just a feeling. Right now I just want you to hold on to Ya'er. Let Ya'er know that Xiang Shaolong still loves her so. Ya'er is already very contented."

Xiang Shaolong carefully examined her countenance and saw that he face had turned red. Her elegant eyes twinkled with a fantastic and stunning expression. The color and brightness she had lost had reappeared on her silken face. He was delighted and momentarily speechless.

Zhao Ya gently said: "Zhao Da and the rest have been loyal and devoted to me. Can you find something appropriate for them? They will now serve you! Because of me, they have all abstained from marrying and setting up a family. It is now up to you to help Ya'er fulfill this wish."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong realize that something is very wrong. He shook severely and said: "You are now allowed to say such things. You will

recover very quickly."

Zhao Ya laughed dully: "Look! This great snow is so beautiful, purifying all the ugly and hateful things in this world of men. Even though Ya'er has had many men, but the only one she has truly loved is Shaolong. All the others have been forgotten. I should have died in Daliang long ago. But knowing that I still have a chance to meet you, I held on until now. If you had not called to me just now, I might not have woken up again. Shaolong Ah! Don't cry, ok?" Reaching out her sleeves, she wiped his tears.

Xiang Shaolong's whole body turned cold, his heart feeling as if it had been sliced by a knife and his guts feeling as if they had been cut short. He said in a trembling voice: "Ya'er, don't scare me. You must press on. This world still holds many wonderful things, awaiting your enjoyment."

Zhao Ya smiled and with a voice as soft as water, she said: "Beautiful things are always short-lived. I still remember meeting you for the first time on the street in Handan. Then your clothes were ragged and you had a down and out appearance. But you had that bright, valiant and brave disposition that made you prouder than any aristocrat, causing Ya'er to be unable to suppress the passion in her heart."

Pausing, her eyes emitted an unsurpassed red-hot expression. She lightly moaned: "'When the golden wind meets the jade outdoors, it is better than countless moments in man's world'*. Do you remember saying these two beautiful sentences of poetry in my little house? Those were the most beautiful words of endearment Ya'er has ever heard in her life. It was because of these two sentences that I forced myself to stay in Daliang. But in

the end I could not help but come to see you."

* The saying is '金风玉露一相逢，便胜却人间无数'. It is attributed to a Qin dynasty official and means something like: If two people who love each other run into each other, even though their time is short, it is to be treasured and is better than countless beautiful moments in the world. Reference from <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/20626276>

She then held on to him desperately saying: "Shaolong ah, you are Zhao Ya's drop of honey! Please kiss me ok?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart was shattered, and in the midst of his broken and dejected spirit, sealed her scorching lips.

Zhao Ya responded with passion, gasping with hurried breaths.

She then collapsed into Xiang Shaolong's bosom, her lips turning cold.

Only after Xiang Shaolong parted from her lips in shock did he realize that she had stopped breathing.

However, the corners of her mouth betrayed an expression of happiness and satisfaction. Her eyes were lightly closed, looking as if she had just fallen into a deep sleep.

But he knew that she would never awaken again. The reason she was able to survive till today was because she was vigorously striving to see him one last time! With Zhao Ya's death, Xiang Shaolong also felt his past in Handan

buried in the current of time.

The three Zhao beauties with whom he had relations had all passed away one after the other. Every incident was a great blow to him. By this time, he had become numb.

He was truly exhausted emotionally.

He had seen the death of Lu Gong and Zhao Ya in a single day. And both had happened so suddenly that he could no longer bear the mental and physical torment. After he handed Zhao Ya's body to Tao Fang to manage, he followed Zhao Ya's last wishes to comfort Zhao Da and the rest. After that, he could endure no more and hid in his room crying bitterly before falling into a deep sleep.

When he awakened, he found Wu Tingfang curled up and asleep in his embrace. He hurriedly woke her and cleaned himself up before rushing towards the palace.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the eighteen guardians guarded his procession.

His conflict with Lu Buwei was getting more intense and there was danger of assassination at any time. That is why they were extremely careful where ever they went.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is attending court.

Under normal circumstances, a city defense official like him would never

have had the opportunity to attend morning court. Fortunately, Xiang Shaolong's other position was Grand Tutor. According to tradition, before the Crown Prince had come of age and with the special permission of the emperor himself, the Grand Tutor could attend court meetings. The moment he stepped through the palace gates, the two brothers Lord Changping and Lord Changwen cut Xiang Shaolong off and pulled him aside to talk.

The two of them were both alarmed and glad, apparently having heard of Lord Changping's candidacy for the position of Left Premier under his instigation.

As everyone dismounted, Lord Changping laughed bitterly and said: "I do not know whether to thank you or to punch you. Crown Prince sought me out late last night to tell me that you had recommended me to replace Premier Xu. Ai, why are you unwilling to take it on yourself? If you are willing to be Left Premier, all of us will support you heart and soul."

Lord Changwen was even a little suspicious and said: "When elder brother has made a mess of things, it would be obtaining disaster from a blessing."

Teng Yi laughed and said: "These two chaps are usually unafraid of heaven and hell. Unexpectedly they are now afraid of promotion and wealth. Anyone who sees this will be laughing away."

Jing Jun laughed till his belly ached, saying: "The Crown Prince and us will be in the background holding you up. Even if you meet something impossible just act as normal. Whats the worst that could happen?"

Lord Changping angrily said: "Its easy for all of you to speak. Lu Buwei's power spans the court and commoners, everyone is currying his favor, falling over each other to flatter him and speaking his words. Shaolong, you hide away on the side while asking me to oppose him openly. Will I have anymore peace and happiness in the future?"

Xiang Shaolong embraced his shoulders and blandly said: "Before heaven bestows a heavy responsibility on a person, he must first... Hei! something about bitterness of the heart**. Don't worry! Li Si is at the back to help you plan and decide. Lu Buwei has also lost Mo Ao. What are you afraid of? Come! Let us go in."

** The saying is '天降大任于斯人也，必先苦其心志，劳其筋骨，饿其体肤，空乏其身，行指乱其所为，所以动心忍性，曾益其所不能'. It roughly translates to: Before heaven bestows a heavy responsibility on a person, the person must first suffer bitterness of the heart, toil of the muscles and bones, hunger of the stomach, till the emaciation of his body and upheaval of his life, thereby building his endurance, broadening his knowledge and developing his capabilities. Reference from <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/9592972>.

Lord Changping was unconvinced and said: "Li Si is so busy with official business, where will he find time to help me?"

Xiang Shaolong signaled a goodbye to Teng Yi and dragged Lord Changping and his brother away.

In the midst of the multitude of prostrating officials, Xiao Pan sat on the King's throne with Zhu Ji to the right on the Empress's seat.

The King's dais was split into two levels. Xiao Pan's personal guards were led by Lord Changping and Lord Changwen and formed a line on the lower level reaching the entrance of the palace hall.

Besides the guards, nobody was allowed to carry arms into the hall.

More than seventy civilian court officials and military generals formed up on the two sides in their tidy court regalia. The right row was headed by Lu Buwei followed by Wang Wan, Cai Zhe, Jia Gongcheng, Lord Yunyang Ying Ao, Lord Yiqu Ying Qi and other civilian court officials. Li Si and Lao Ai were in the seventeenth and eighteenth positions respectively. They could already be counted as fairly high ranking officials.

The other row is headed by Wang Ling, followed by Wang Chi, Meng Ao and Du Bi.

As the Crown Prince's Grand Tutor, Xiang Shaolong was fairly senior and stood just after Du Bi.

Xiao Pan first expressed grief over Lu Gong's death and declared that the funeral would be in seven days and that he would preside over it personally.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that Xiao Pan was calm and unhurried, carrying within him the lofty mettle of the future Qin Shihuang. He was pleased.

Everyone paid obeisance in acknowledgement. Lu Buwei was the first to speak: "Empress Dowager and Crown Prince are wise. Our Great Qin is in troubled times. First was the Eastern region uprising. Next Premier Xu was attacked and murdered within the Wei border. Finally Lu Gong fell ill in worry and anger, and passed away because of this. The sovereign should quickly restore the government and fill the vacancies in order to build a strong state and spread his benevolent rule."

He paused for effect, then continued with a sneer: "Blood debts must be repaid with blood. Else the little kids in the East will think that our Great Qin is incapable!"

Wang Chi shouted in fury: "The Chu people are too much. If they think that they can appease us with Lord Chunshen's severed head and five cantons, they are certainly naive."

All the officials echoed in agreement. The motion had gained vast momentum.

Xiao Pan coldly observed the officials' reactions and said indifferently: "We will put aside the blood debt with Chu for now. There is more to this matter than meets the eye. As for the vacancies left behind by Premier Xu and the Commander-in-Chief, Empress Dowager and I have discussed this and we have made our decision."

Lu Buwei was shocked and looked towards Zhu Ji. Seeing that she remained indifferent, he knew something was wrong. He gravely said: "Even the Chu people have openly acknowledged their culpability in the murder of Premier

Xu. What secret is there? Could Crown Prince please explain."

Xiao Pan replied in displeasure: "Your sovereign has just said to put this matter aside for now, did Premier Mentor not hear it?"

These few words were extremely blunt. Lu Buwei's expression changed a little. Exchanging a look with Wang Chi and Meng Ao, he closed his mouth and kept quiet.

Having lost Zhu Ji's support, how would he dare to contradict Xiao Pan?

Wang Chi and the rest couldn't imagine that Xiao Pan would be so unyielding. For a moment they did not dare to say anything.

Since Shang Yang's reform of Qin politics, power had been concentrated in the sovereign. If Zhu Ji does not object, Xiao Pan could do whatever he pleased. Short of fomenting outright rebellion, all subjects had to obey his words as absolute commands.

Xiao Pan was secretly gratified. Ever since Xiang Shaolong left Qin, he had silently endured the pressure from Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei. Now that Xiang Shaolong was back, he felt a sea change in power, both psychologically and in substance. How could he not seize the opportunity to emphasize his sovereignty, cracking down on Lu Buwei to intimidate the pack of court officials.

If he was not such a person, he would not have become the Qin Shihuang in the later years.

The great hall became so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

Zhu Ji spoke for the first time, saying: "The position of Minister of War will be assumed by Great General Wang Ling. Do the subjects have any opinion?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself on hearing this. He mused that Xiao Pan the future Qin Shihuang would never have asked for anyone's opinion.

Wang Chi was from the same clan as Wang Ling and was happy with what he heard, saying: "Great General Wang Ling is certainly the best candidate." Lu Buwei had originally intended for it to be Meng Ao, but since Zhu Ji had stated her weighty opinion, he had no choice but to abide by it. He couldn't help glaring at Xiang Shaolong ferociously, knowing that it was him behind all this mischief.

Cai Ze acted the senior and bowed, saying: "The post of Left Premier is of great importance. Unless the candidate is virtuous and prestigious, he cannot command the respect of the people. Who is Empress Dowager and Crown Prince's preferred candidate?"

It was Zhu Ji's turn to be struck speechless. This was because if virtue and prestige were the criteria, Lord Changping would be far back in the queue. Xiang Shaolong took a look at Lord Changping who was standing guard on the dais. His head was bowed and he was silent. His face was blushing, betraying his fear and doubt. He knew that if he did not turn the tide now, all the officials would soon echo Cai Ze. Maybe even Zhu Ji would begin to waver too.

With a loud laugh, he said: "Duke Cai is right. Nonetheless this small official thinks that this is still insufficient. In my humble opinion, the candidates eligible for the post of Premier should fulfill three criteria."

Next, he turned towards Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji and bowed, saying: "Empress Dowager and Crown Prince are wise. Will you allow this small official to explain his viewpoint?"

Xiao Pan rejoiced and after asking Zhu Ji for instructions, he happily ordered: "Grand Tutor Xiang, please speak forthrightly. Do not have any reservations."

Lu Buwei and his faction were all wary in their hearts, but could not prevent him from speaking.

Du Bi's face displayed a sneer. In his standpoint, he would actually rather that the Left Premier post not fall into Lu Buwei's hands.

Even though Wang Chi was leaning towards Lu Buwei, he was finally still a central pillar of the Qin military. He also had a favorable opinion of Xiang Shaolong. That is why as long as what Xiang Shaolong said was reasonable, he would support it.

The situation was exceptionally delicate.

Everyone's attention fell on Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed with a little pride and said: "I am unworthy. Firstly, this person must have sufficient learning to assume this office. Virtue and

vision can be cultivated and are not so important at this moment. Take Premier Lu as an example. Everyone knows the circumstances under which he assumed the post of Premier, but is there anyone now who is not convinced in heart and speech? From this you can understand the reasoning behind this small official's first criterion.

Everyone was dumbstruck, the reason being that Xiang Shaolong has forcibly laid this matter on Lu Buwei's credibility. If anyone objects, it would be akin to challenging Lu Buwei.

Lu Buwei almost burst with rage. He hated most having his past mentioned. Nonetheless this time he found it difficult to speak.

Meng Ao's expression became grave and he laughed coldly, asking: "Could we know what Official Xiang's next two criteria are?"

Xiang Shaolong coolly replied: "The position of Left Premier oversees the largest part of the military chain of command, hence the person must be a high-ranking military officer. Furthermore, to satisfy the hearts of the soldiers, this person must be like Premier Xu, a native-born Qin general. Only thus can he inspire our Great Qin's soldiers to serve willingly and loyally. This criterion is critical and must not be neglected."

These words had as well as eliminated any chance for Wang Wan or Meng Ao to be the Left Premier.

And the only people who could fulfill these two criteria were Du Bi and Wang Chi. Lord Changping fell short by a little bit.

Lu Buwei was green with anger, but could not say anything once again. This was because Xiang Shaolong's logic was irrefutable.

Apart from Wang Chi himself, all the high ranking military officers from native Qin nodded in agreement.

Xiao Pan slapped the table and said: "Well said! Now even I am interested in hearing the third criterion."

Xiang Shaolong first thanked Xiao Pan for his permission before smiling and saying: "The third criterion is that this person must be youthful and promising so as to be able to grow together with the Crown Prince. This will ensure continuity of policies. This argument may be audacious, but there is reason behind it. As long as one thinks carefully, one can see the beauty of it."

In truth this had always been the weakest of Xiang Shaolong's three criteria. The officials erupted immediately, frantically discussing the issue with one another.

Lu Buwei chuckled and said: "Grand Tutor Xiang's last criterion leaves much room for discussion. Who does Grand Tutor have in mind?"

Xiao Pan laughed and said: "Grand Tutor Xiang's words agree with my thinking. Lord Changping, receive the decree!"

The great hall swiftly become silent.

Lord Changping ran out and prostrated himself below the dragon steps.

Xiao Pan solemnly pronounced: "From this day forward, Lord Changping will be my Great Qin's Left Premier. My decision is final. The officials shall not quibble over this nor shall they have another opinion!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed in his heart and without even sparing the livid Lu Buwei a look, he led the court in kneeling in acknowledgement of the Crown Prince's order.

What had been an impossibility had become reality just like that.

The pivotal move was obtaining Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's support. With this, Lao Ai and Zhu Ji's faction had also openly and irrevocably severed relations with Lu Buwei.

Chapter 04

Gold upon the City Gates

On the same day that Lord Changping assumed the position of Left Premier, Prince Dan led his men back to Yan. Xiang Shaolong asked Liu Chao and Pu Bu to lead City Cavalry troops in escort, preventing any conspiracy from Lu Buwei.

As they parted reluctantly, Xiang Shaolong left the city and returned to the ranch to bury Zhao Ya properly. Due to their own mourning, they were obliged by custom to miss Lu Gong's funeral.

By the time everything was settled, ten days had passed. Xiao Pan dispatched messengers three times to urge him back to the city. By now, Xiang Shaolong had gradually nursed himself back from his grief and determined to return to the city the next morning.

Heavy snow had started falling since dusk. After they had said a prayer for Zhao Ya, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran returned to their home shoulder to shoulder.

Ji Yanran grabbed his hand and gently said: "When you return to the city this time, you should first pay Sister Qing a visit, else she is sure to be very unhappy!"

Xiang Shaolong as startled: "Have you seen her?"

Ji Yanran nodded, saying: "I did see her! She also knows about Madam Ya's passing, if not she would not have forgiven you."

Xiang Shaolong replied in distress: "Didn't you forbid me from touching your Sister Qing? Why are you encouraging me to look for her now?"

Ji Yanran sighed serenely saying: "Maybe its because of my love and respect for her! I think she is losing her self control with you. Else she would not have lowered her noble self to come here looking for you the day after we returned. Of course she pretended it was just to see me, but on learning that you had gone to the court meeting, her entire being became listless. Ai! I do not know what to say."

The moment they stepped into the rear garden, there was a flash and Shan Rou had cut off the two people.

The two of them received a fright and let go of their hands.

Shan Rou reached out her hand and pinched Ji Yanran's cheek and displayed an enchanting smile, saying: "Beautiful girl! This girl wants to borrow your husband for a while!"

Ji Yanran did not expect to be teased by Shan Rou and did not know whether to laugh or be angry. She said in annoyance: "If you want to borrow then borrow! Am I Ji Yanran that possessive?" With a lovely laugh, she left.

Shan Rou took the initiative and pulled Xiang Shalong's hand and coming to a little pavilion in the inner garden, she turned and hugged him tightly. She

heaved a sigh and said: "Xiang Shaolong! I am leaving!"

Xiang Shaolong hoarsely cried: "What?"

Shan Rou pushed him away and turning her lovely body around, said with some irritation: "I've said it so clearly, didn't you hear? I am leaving!"

Xiang Shaolong moved forward and hugged her little petulant waist, somberly saying: "Where is Sister Rou going?"

Shan Rou heaved another sigh. Shaking her head, she said: "Please don't ask, ok? In short I will be returning to Qi tomorrow. I can't be sure that I will be back to see you in the future."

Xiang Shaolong recalled the words she had said when they were in Chu. Then she had denied it as a lie, but going by the present circumstance, it could be true after all. Thinking about the reasons she would throw herself into another man's embrace, he could not help but be dejected. Still, he could not do anything and could only remain speechless for a while.

Shan Rou quietly said: "Why are you not talking? Are you angry with me?!"

Xiang Shaolong released the hand he had looped around her and laughed bitterly saying: "What right do I have to be angry with you? Sister Rou should do whatever she wants to do! I could I Xiang Shaolong interfere?"

Shan Rou turned around like a tornado and looped her arms round his neck, both her eyes displaying deep emotion. With a gentleness that she has never

shown before, she said: "Let Zhi Zhi represent me in service of you, but tonight I Shan Rou will belong to you Xiang Shaolong. I will listen to commands and run your errands. At the same time I want you to remember that Shan Rou will never forget Xiang Shaolong. Its just regretful that Shan Rou has made a promise to someone else. The details have been made known to you earlier."

Xiang Shaolong looked at the flurrying snow outside the pavilion and remembered the tragic Zhao Ya. The pain in his heart covered over his indignation over Shan Rou's leaving. He nodded his head and said: "I understand. Sister should wholeheartedly do what she wants to do! We cannot have everything we want. I Xiang Shaolong am resigned to this fate."

Shan Rou silently leaned into his embrace and for the first time, Xiang Shaolong saw the glistening teardrop rolling in her beautiful eyes.

When he woke the next day, Shan Rou had already left quietly.

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to set aside his longing for her and got up to practice his sword skills.

Ji Yanran excitedly came over with her spear to spar with him. Wu Tingfang, the Tian Sisters and Xiang Bao'er stood at the side cheering. The atmosphere was glad and cheerful.

The Talented Lady Ji's spear technique was certainly accomplished. As the fight developed, even though Xiang Shaolong gave his all in an acrobatic display, he

could not break the power of her spear. Withdrawing his sword, he laughed: "This kid admits defeat. Fortunately I still have the Flying Dragon Spear that is owed to me. I will go to the Intoxicated Wind Mansion these couple of days to demand it from Wu Fu. I will ask the Talented Lady's advice again."

Ji Yanran held her spear horizontally and laughed, saying: "This house has house rules. If you wish your wife to accompany you for the night, you must dispossess the spear in her hand. Tingfang and the rest will be witnesses."

Wu Tingfang and the rest applauded in glee, as if they would not be happy till they had seen some chaos.

Xiang Shaolong mischievously laughed: "If Talented Lady Ji considers that her opponent was not her husband whose emotions restrained his hand, do you think she will be able to boast on to the world!"

Ji Yanran's jade cheeks burned deep red and she angrily said: "If Xiang Shaolong is this kind of petty despicable person, even if I surrender my body, I will not be happy in my heart."

Xiang Shaolong knew that her intentions were good, to use this to encourage him to improve his skills diligently. He sobered up and said: "Relax! I was but cracking a joke! As long as Talented Lady gives me three years, I will be able to succeed"

Ji Yanran's pupils opened wide and she hoarsely said: "Three years?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly and stepped forward, pulling her into his

embrace and said soothingly: "Even three days is too long for me. How could I let the Talented Lady restrain herself in isolation like a widow for three years, ha....."

At this moment, Jing Shan arrived with a report that Wu Yingyuan had returned.

As Xiang Shaolong celebrated, Wu Tingfang had barrelled out to greet him.

As he arrived at the main hall of the master residence, the spirited Wu Yingyuan had been enveloped by Wu Tingfang in a large embrace. Tao Fang was reporting the recent developments to him.

After a round of noise and excitement, Wu Yingyuan carried Xiang Bao'er and sat down beside Xiang Shaolong and Tao Fang to talk. Wu Tingfang automatically massaged her father's tired shoulders. The hall was brimming with familial warmth and affection.

After Wu Yingyuan said a few sentences of praise to Xiang Shaolong, he laughed and said: "This trip I visited the distant northern lands and saw that the land that Wu Zhuo has been working on is truly a blessed paradise. The terrain is superior, with abundant water and lush greenery. Wu Zhuo has constructed a large ranch and has also received a few minority tribes who have been oppressed by the barbarians as resident workers. The whole effort is progressing steadily, but more manpower is needed else we cannot deal with the barbarians."

Xiang Shaolong said: "I too have this intention. This is because Wang Jian will

be posted back to Xianyang soon. Without his assistance, we will have to rely on ourselves for everything."

Wu Yingyuan said: "I have discussed this with Little Zhuo. He needs at least two thousand more men. Is that a problem?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "No problem at all.

Wu Yingyuan relaxed and informed Tao Fang: "Master Tao, please take charge of this. Eventually, I wished to move our Wu Household gradually away from Qin towards the Northern Lands. After all, it is the best place to live and prosper. In the future, we need not worry about politics or power struggles."

After discussing the details further, Xiang Shaolong led his wives and the Guardians back to Xianyang City.

Back at the city, he headed to the palace first to visit Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan was delighted to see him again and received him as usual in the Imperial Study. After seating themselves, he started: "Lian Po has been sacked."

Although it was within expectations, Xiang Shaolong felt some hints of despair. From now onwards, Zhao will be controlled by Guo Kai and Pang Nuan. At the same time, he wondered about Li Mu's fate.

Xiao Pan appears to have a great dislike for Lian Po. With this burden off his

chest, he added: “Without Lian Po, Zhao is akin to having lost half of their fighting ability. If Li Mu is gone too, it will be the end of Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he harbours deep hatred for the people of Zhao which is something beyond his control. In a deep voice, he inquired: “Did they kill Lian Po?”

Xiao Pan plainly state: “Lian Po is a wise strategist. The minute he sensed something was wrong, he immediately led his kinsmen and escaped to Daliang City together. I heard that he had fallen ill due to his anger at the Zhao politicians. Ai! Age is catching up on him and he is just a shade of his former glory.”

Xiang Shaolong’s spirits sank.

Xiao Pan sighed: “Unfortunately, Li Mu is still fighting a successful battle against the Xiong Nu at the northern border. It seems like he will still enjoy a prolonged period of prosperity. As long as he is around, we cannot afford to attack Zhao and can only focus our armies on Han and Wei.”

Remembering his old friends Han Chuang, Han Feizi and Lord Longyang, Xiang Shaolong felt even worse.

He was most concerned about Lord Longyang and expressed: “If Lian Po is helping Wei, it will not be so easy to attack them.”

Misunderstanding his intention, Xiao Pan sniggered: “Master need not fret. This is called retribution. Earlier this year, Lian Po had attacked Wei and

conquered their Rongyang Province. King Anli of Wei hates him to the core. Now that he has defected to Daliang, it will be a blessing if they did not kill him at sight. Why would they even use him as their defending general?"

Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Changing the topic, Xiao Pan commented: "Using the water engineer Zheng Guo from Han, Lu Buwei has started building the irrigation canal for more than a year. They planned to divert water from River Jing towards the east and merge with River Luo in the north. This project has exhausted our resources and manpower, making it hard for us to attack the eastern states. At most, we can only attack Han. Currently, Meng Ao is working hard at recruiting and training new soldiers to increase our military strength. I have a suggestion: Why don't Master lead an expedition personally and accumulate military contributions? This will help to suppress Meng Ao and Wang Ci's influence."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly shocked. He hurriedly advised: "This is not the best time. If I am gone, Lu Buwei may try something funny in my absence. We had better wait for Lord Changping to consolidate his influence first."

Xiao Pan sighed, agreeing that Xiang Shaolong's words do make sense and did not insist any further. His mood turning better, he laughed: "Thinking about the other day when we coordinated our words during the morning court and suppressed Lu Buwei, I was filled with joy."

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Lu Buwei will surely find some other ways to hit back at us. Did he do anything unusual these days?"

Xiao Pan bitterly smiled: "His methods caught me by surprise. On the second

day after you left for the farm, that traitor dangled a reward of one thousand taels of gold upon the city gates. He bragged that if anyone can improve on his <<Spring & Autumn Annals of Lu>> by even one word, he will reward the gold to him. This has caused everyone to analyze his works. As Master knows, this book from hell is only his own theories to establish power and compete with my royal authority. This is so infuriating!”

Xiang Shaolong was speechless. This traitor surely knows how to advertise himself to the common population. In this manner, he will indirectly influence the thinking of the Qin population and create doubts about Shang Yang’s reforms which emphasizes on royal authority.

He is from the 21st Century and he understood the powerful effects of mass media influence better than Xiao Pan.

This cannot be easily resolved by force or strength. Reminded about his beloved Talented Lady Ji, he stood up and promised: “Crown Prince need not panic. Give me some time to think this over. The next time I see you, I will present you with a viable solution.”

Xiao Pan was elated: “I knew that Master will give me a brilliant counter strategy. Please hurry up. I will wait for your good news.”

In actual fact, Xiang Shaolong is making an empty promise and did not have the slightest confidence that Talented Lady Ji will have a good solution too. But in front of this future Qin Shihuang who holds him in such high regard, he could only force himself to accept this task.

Stepping out of the Imperial Study, he thought of Li Si and guessed that he should be able to provide some assistance to counter Lu Buwei's propaganda too. After all, he is more talented than himself in political theories. With this in mind, he went to look for him.

Li Si was buried in his work. When Xiang Shaolong showed up at his workplace, he happily welcomed him into the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Why are you so busy? Is it related to Lord Changping?"

Li Si settled down in his seat and his face reddened: "I have just finished his work and am now working on my own."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Why does Brother Li appear to be embarrassed about his own work?"

Li Si replied in a soft voice: "Shaolong must not laugh at me. For the past six months, I have been vigorously analyzing Shang Yang's reforms and spotted several loopholes and weakness in the operations and executions. Thus, I focused my attention and came up with a more suitable management model. If it is utilised, it will improve administration drastically and is extremely favourable to uniting the world in the future."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Tell me more about it."

Li Si's eyes shone brightly and his spirits lifted: "Firstly, there is a weakness regarding the Left and Right Premiers. Both are positions with high authorities and it is hard to define their roles. Whoever that is holding more

power can interfere with the other Premier's work. For example, Lu Buwei is constantly interfering with the Qin military. If we can limit his jurisdiction, we can curb his excessive power and solve the problem of Qin officials holding more authority than the Qin King at the same time."

Xiang Shaolong slapped his armrest, exclaiming: "I understand. Brother Li can use this to counter the <<Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu>>!"

Li Si nodded: "Exactly. Unfortunately, my powers are limited and can only use this as a discussion topic but cannot implement this into full force to counter Lu Buwei's theories. Honestly speaking, Lu Buwei's theories are an amalgamation of the best theories in the world. Despite being on opposing ends, I must admit that he is a true administrative talent."

Xiang Shaolong insisted: "Brother Li, tell me more about your theories first."

Li Si joyfully gushed: "My methods are simple and effective. It is known as Three Premiers Nine Ministers administration. There will be a Chief Premier who will manage the majority of the officials and is in charge of politics. The Left Premier shall be renamed the Military Premier who will be in charge of all military affairs. The Right Premier shall be renamed the Administrative Premier who will manage all administrative affairs and inspections. These three Premiers roles do not overlap and they report directly to the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong was moved. This Three Premier Nine Ministers method is much more appealing and to think that it was Li Si who created it. No wonder his legacy will last for centuries. At the same time, he can sense that Li Si

harboured some selfish motives. The Administrative Premier is a role he created for himself in the future. He calmed down after accepting the fact that all men are selfish and seek personal gain at the end of the day.

Li Si continued: “The majority of the nine ministers refers the existing official positions that are already present in the Qin court but with their roles more clearly defined. The three Premiers are in charge of helping the King rule the country and the day to day running of the country is still left to these ministers. They include the Rewards Minister, Ceremonial Minister, Health Minister, Defence Minister, Religious Minister, Entertainment Minister, Transportation Minister, Culture Minister and Construction Minister. The Palace Guards, Imperial Infantry and Imperial Cavalry shall be combined into one army under the control of the Defence Minister. This will avoid the internal conflicts between these three armies.”

Xiang Shaolong can tell that Li Si is putting so much effort into explaining these to him so that he can in turn present them to Xiao Pan.

He was willing to do this favour for Li Si as it is beneficial to Qin too. He nodded: “Brother Li please prepare your work well. When I enter the palace later, I will present these theories to Crown Prince.”

Li Si jumped up for joy: “You are truly my best friend and confidante. If Crown Prince is willing to adopt my theories, all my years of hard work will not be in vain.”

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and left merrily. He is more confident than anyone that this theory will be adopted. Otherwise, he would not have heard about this method when he was still in the 21st century.

Chapter 05

The Beginning of the Five Elements Theory

Passing by the Qin Residence, Xiang Shaolong can feel his entire body itching to see its owner. Finally, he succumbed to his desire.

Every family warrior guarding the gate knew about his special relationship with Qin Qing and invited him to enter the residence without announcing his arrival.

The housekeeper Uncle Fang escorted him into the main hall and was about to inform Qin Qing when Xiang Shaolong smiled: "I am just passing by. Let me just say Hi to her." After enquiring about her whereabouts, he entered the corridor and walked towards the rear chambers.

A few pretty maids were playing with the snow in the garden. Chancing upon Xiang Shaolong, they whispered and giggled among themselves before pointing him towards Qin Qing.

Crossing over the door ledge into the eastern chamber, he saw Qin Qing leaning towards the table at an angle. Dressed in a pale green dress and a purple shawl embroidered with phoenixes, her hair was tied up neatly in a bun with a few strands of hair hanging loosely. The loose strands of hair made her even more mesmerizing coupled with her flawless beauty. Even with Xiang Shaolong's strong willpower, he was stunned at this display before him.

With one hand holding a piece of cloth and the other sewing with a needle and thread, Qin Qing was fixated in her work.

Never in her wildest dreams did she expect Xiang Shaolong to appear suddenly before her. Shocked, she frantically tidied her hair and sat upright, chirping: "Ai, it is you!"

Witnessing her enchanting movements, Xiang Shaolong was aroused and stepped forward, sitting down beside her. Almost touching her lap, he leaned forward and greeted: "Hello Grand Tutor Qin! Please forgive me for visiting you after such a long delay."

Qin Qing leaned backwards and put more distance between their two faces but did not find fault with him. She almost wanted to whine out but held back, making her even sexier.

Xiang Shaolong noticed the embroidery in her hands and she somehow tried to hide it from his prying eyes. Curious, Xiang Shaolong asked: "What picture is Grand Tutor embroidering?"

Qin Qing's neck became burning hot instantly and she lowered her head, whining: "Will Official Xiang please watch your own behaviour? How can you sit right beside me at the same table without asking for permission?" Xiang Shaolong guessed that her embarrassment came about because the embroidery is possibly linked to him. His heart filled with sweetness, he gently coaxed: "I am only here to pay my respects and have to take my leave now. If I have offended you, it is just for a short period anyway. Please forgive me for this temporary rudeness."

Qin Qing seriously state: “You! You had to barge in like this and caught me in a dishevelled state.”

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward slightly to enjoy her body fragrance and smiled: “I beg to differ. Had I not barged in, I would not be able to see the intoxicating side of you.”

Qin Qing regained her usual icy composure but her face is still slightly red. Standing up and away from the other side of the table, she placed her embroidery into a painted box near her. She carefully and delicately arranged everything in the box neatly before shutting it. Xiang Shaolong came up to her side and imitated her posture, softly asking: “I have returned safely. Are you happy?”

From his angle, he can enjoy the features of this ancient beauty and was swept off his feet. Naturally, his words carry a hint of teasing.

Qin Qing kept quiet for some time before turning around to shoot him a look. She slowly sighed: “I thought Official Xiang has something else to do? Don’t waste your precious time here.”

These two sentences are as good as pouring a bucket of ice water over Xiang Shaolong’s head. Xiang Shaolong immediately snapped out of his stupor and his passion fizzled out. After a short daze, he can no longer stand the awkward silence between the two of them and with some anger; he nodded and paid his respects. He furiously strode towards the door and swore to never step into the Qin Residence again.

Before he can cross the door ledge, Qin Qing softly whistled: “Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong stood still and coldly snorted: “What else does Grand Tutor Qin want now?!”

Footsteps sounded softly as Qin Qing came up to his back. Her gentle voice filled his ears: “Are you angry?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “If it was you, would you be happy?”

Qin Qing went around him to his front and plainly state: “Of course not but do you realise that your behaviour is simply disrespectful!”

Xiang Shaolong had a big revelation. All along, Qin Qing had misunderstood him. As she has many spies in the palace, she must have thought that he and Zhu Ji share a special relationship which makes Zhu Ji support him wholeheartedly. She was mistaken that he had used his charm to seduce Zhu Ji and despised him for that. Therefore, she becomes cold and unfeeling towards him.

He shook his head and smiled bitterly: “Grand Tutor Qin thinks too lowly of me. Forget it! You are free to believe whatever you wish. I am used to being misunderstood by you anyway.” Ignoring her wailing, he left the Qin residence in a huff.

Just as he left the Qin Residence with the Eighteen Guardians, he ran headlong into Ying Ying and several of her female warriors.

Both their entourage stopped beside the main road. With a guilty conscience, Ying Ying awkwardly greeted: “Hello Official Xiang! Why didn’t you visit me despite having returned such a long time ago?”

Xiang Shaolong is in a bad mood and he knew that Ying Ying is still fooling around with Guan Zhongxie. Unwilling to humour her, he coldly replied: “Will you be free if I visited you?” Paying no further attention to her, he slapped his horse and left.

Back at the Wu Residence, he quickly searched for Ji Yanran.

Talented Lady Ji had just completed her two favourite tasks: Taking a short nap and having a hot water shower after the nap. Smelling sweetly, she was seated on a small armchair and leaning on a soft cushion. She was slightly covered by a light blanket and was reading quietly. A jade flute was resting on her bosom and it was a sight to behold.

Seeing her, Xiang Shaolong forgot all the unhappiness he encountered today and slipped into her blanket and her bosom without her consent. Ji Yanran smilingly put down her book and allowed Xiang Shaolong to soak in her fragrance. She slowly asked: “What problems did you have today? You have such a long face.”

Xiang Shaolong let out a comfortable sigh and explained to her about Lu Buwei hanging a thousand taels of gold at the City gates.

Ji Yanran furrowed her brows slightly and crossed her legs. Pushing some loose strands of hair behind her ears, she simply replied: “This is a powerful

method by Lu Buwei to create the impression that he is the new saint. It is not impossible to counter him. Ai! Can you please stop kissing me there? How can I think straight with this distraction?"

Xiang Shaolong moved his greedy lips away from her neck and sat upright unwillingly. Scrutinizing her well-defined eyes, he cheered: "I knew you would have a good plan."

Ji Yanran shot him a look and her eyes twinkled with joy. She added: "I have read the Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu and it is truly a masterpiece. Its only loophole is that it is heavily plagiarised from the works of others. Compared to godfather, he is way below. Its weakness is its impracticability. If I recite his Five Elements theory, Lu Buwei's work will seem like child's play."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "I thought godfather's work is just something used to predict the future? How can it be used to counter the Annals?"

Leaning into his bosom, Ji Yanran cutely giggled: "Hubby is so muddle-headed and adorable at the same time. Lu Buwei is promoting his Annals to portray himself as a new saint and suppress the influence of the Qin King over the population. All we need to do is to explain the theories of the Five Elements. For example, Zhou is Fire Element and Qin is Water Element. Water extinguishes Fire so Qin will unite the world for sure. We will immortalize Crown Prince into the Leader of the era and Lu Buwei can only pale in comparison."

Xiang Shaolong was ecstatic and carried the fragrant and helpless Ji Yanran in his arms, laughing: "Talented Lady Ji shall now accompany me into the

palace.”

Ji Yanran protested: “I am so relaxed now; can we enter the palace tomorrow instead?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed: “No! The wife should follow her husband. Talented Lady Ji must leave with me immediately.”

While they are still bickering, Tian Zhen came to report that Qin Qing is here.

Ji Yanran struggled out of his bosom and kissed him: “You go ahead and welcome Sister Qin. I need to get changed in order to enter the palace with you! After all, it is just my luck to marry a husband like you!” Laughingly, she slipped away.

When Xiang Shaolong stepped into the main hall, Qin Qing is seated with her back to the scenic garden that was covered with a blanket of white snow. It was an elegant portrayal that highlights her aristocracy and purity.

Coming up to her back, Xiang Shaolong was feeling apologetic, knowing that he had been too narrow minded, causing her to come all the way here to find him. He lightly apologised: “I’m sorry!”

Qin Qing’s delicate frame trembled slightly and she took two deep breaths to suppress her emotions. In a peaceful manner, she declared: “Xiang Shaolong! The reason I come all the way here today is to clarify something with you.”

All Xiang Shaolong wanted to do was to grab her tender shoulders and pull

her into his bosom but Qin Qing has this aura of innocence and purity that creates an intangible gap between them, forcing him to resist this temptation.

He sighed: "If you are here to appease me with some insincere words, you can save it. I will not deceive myself any longer. I hope you will do the same. Ha!"

Qin Qing turned her body around. With her eyes shining, she wailed loudly: "When did I say anything insincere to you?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that they are now even closer to each other after the last misunderstanding. Qin Qing is easily offended by his gestures because she has been chaste for a very long time. He suitably offered: "That's good. Yanran and I are entering the palace to visit the Crown Prince. Does Grand Tutor Qin want to come along?"

Forgetting about her own affair, Qin Qing was taken by surprise: "What is it that requires you to get Sister Yanran involved?"

Ji Yanran happened to come up to them in her outdoor clothes. Speaking as they walked, they boarded the horse carriage and entered the palace.

Everyone of importance in Xiao Pan's circle of trust was assembled in the Imperial Study. They include Xiang Shaolong, Li Si, Lord Changping, Wang He, Qin Qing and of course Ji Yanran. Together, they are here to listen to Talented Lady Ji's explanation of the Five Elements Theory.

Seated at the head of the seats on Xiao Pan's right, Ji Yanran spoke out in her usual charming manner: "The Five Elements are in continuous motion and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. They submit to the Chosen One. The person who unites the world will possess one of the elements. The Five Elements are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. Each element will shine for some time before it diminishes and be replaced by the rise of another element. The Yellow Emperor is Earth Element. Wood counters Earth. Xia Yu is the Wood Element. Metal counters Wood. Shang Tang is the Metal Element. Fire counters Metal. King Zhou Wen is the Fire Element. Now, the Zhou Dynasty is in decline. The next element to come into power is the Water Element which counters the Fire Element."

His eyes shining with curiosity, Xiao Pan repeated: "Water counters Fire! Water counters Fire!"

Playing on the safe side, Wang He questioned: "I acknowledged the brilliance of Zou Yan's philosophies but it is still a theory that is only professed by him alone. Is there any other evidence?"

Ji Yanran's eyes rotated with charm. Every man in the room including Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong were intoxicated.

As if she is stating a fact, Ji Yanran explained: "The Five Elements have already been mentioned in the Book of Shang; Water nourishes, Fire burns, Wood crafts, Metal tools, Earth constructs. Since the ancient times, there have been six gases and five solids. The five tastes are spicy, sour, salty, bitter and sweet. There are five musical notes Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So. The five main basic colours are white, black, red, yellow and green. The other colours are a

mixture of the basic five and they affect one another.”

Seated beside her, Qin Qing mused: “Mencius did mention that a new King will rise every five hundred odd years. The period between Xia Yu and Shang Tang is around five hundred years; the period between Shang Tang and King Zhou Wen is also five hundred years. Now, the rise of Confucius is about five hundred years after Zhou. This must be the rise and fall of the Five Elements.”

Li Si guessed: “Confucius is only a scholar and is not worthy of being referred to as an outstanding King. I believe Crown Prince is the new Ruler of this era.”

Xiao Pan was overjoyed but was concerned that he may not be the New Saint. He frowned: “It is difficult to pinpoint who is the new King every five hundred years. How can we turn this into an argument against Lu Buwei’s propaganda?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Of course we will employ our own propaganda and stake it on the widespread influence of Talented Lady’s Godfather Zou Yan. Who is a better person other than him to pinpoint the New Saint? I am certain everyone will be convinced by his prediction.” Pausing, he seriously added: “We must use the Five Elements and Official Li’s Three Premier Nine Ministers recommendation to overhaul the power of the Qin court. This will stabilise the Crown Prince’s authority and prevent Lu Buwei from abusing his power.”

Ji Yanran smiled: “This is called ‘using one’s weapons against oneself’. The Spring-Autumn Annals of Lu is a compilation of works from different

philosophers and also contain certain chapters that support Godfather's Five Elements Theory. During the reign of the Yellow Emperor, giant earthworms were sighted and the Earth Element is strong. Earth is yellow which became his nickname. The Water Element will replace the Fire Element. The matching colour of Water is black. We can make use of Lu Buwei's propaganda to turn the tables around and put him down. When that happens, he can only wallow in self pity."

Xiao Pan slapped his armrest and praised: "This is great news indeed."

Still having reservations, Wang He questioned with suspicions: "Talented Lady Ji mentioned that during the reign of the Chosen One, there will be some auspicious sightings. During the Yellow Emperor reign, giant earthworms are sighted and the fire phoenix is sighted during King Zhou Wen's reign. If there is no auspicious sighting for Crown Prince, it is hard to convince the Qin people."

Xiang Shaolong is from the 21st century and knew better than anyone else the powerful effects of marketing and brainwashing the population. Everything can be manipulated to create a sensation. Inspired, he suggested: "This is easy. When the Crown Prince is crossing a river, we will create a Black Dragon that will appear in the water. It will be exactly like the Loch Ness Monster... Hei! It's nothing. The Dragon only needs to reveal its head and back to be regarded as an auspicious sign for the Crown Prince. After that, everything impossible will become possible."

Lord Changping frowned: "Talk is cheap. If we are discovered, we will be the laughing stock of the world."

Xiang Shaolong recalled that Zhou Wei's elder brother Zhou Liang is a boat expert and the mechanical experts of Ji Yanran's State of Yue. He laughed: "Leave this to me. The Black Dragon only needs to move a bit and sink back into the water to accomplish our mission. I guarantee that no one will see through this ruse."

Xiao Pan burst out laughing: "I shall have to bother Grand Tutor then." Facing Ji Yanran, he continued: "If I am the chosen one, there must be other accompanying evidence. Please help me see to this and act according to plan." His expression turning serious, he declared: "This information is limited to everyone present today. If this is leaked, the offender will be executed with his household."

Everyone accepted his order.

Xiang Shaolong is feeling crazy. He did not expect his conflict with Lu Buwei to involve propaganda and marketing. This is going to be a public relations battle.

Chapter 06

Creating Trouble at the Brothel

After the historical meeting, Lord Changping forcefully dragged Xiang Shaolong away from the reluctant Ji Yanran and Qin Qing. At the Left Premier Residence of Lord Changping, Lord Changwen is already waiting for them patiently.

Once the doors have been secured, Lord Changwen slammed the table and cursed: “D@mn that b@sterd Guan Zhongxie! His charm has caused our sister to be completely bewitched by him. The Crown Prince has informed us through Official Li to take our sister in hand. What shall we do?”

Lord Changping rested his hand on Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and laughed: “I can tell that even Grand Tutor Qin is interested in you; wooing our sister should be an easy task for you. Shaolong must help us win her back from Guan Zhongxie’s influences.”

With Shan Rou’s recent departure, Zhao Ya’s death and the passing of Xu Xian and Lu Gong, Xiang Shaolong has been dealt with one heavy blow after another. Except for Qin Qing, he is no longer bothered with any other woman. Ying Ying is obnoxious and fickle-minded. If he had met her when he first came to this era, they will have a good time together. But after experiencing Lady Ni’s suicide and Zhao Ya’s betrayal, all he seeks is true love.

Lord Changping continued: "I heard rumours that Lu Niang Rong is personally pushing for a rematch between you and Guan Zhongxie. She will only marry him if he defeats you."

Lord Changwen pleaded: "No matter what, Shaolong must help the two of us this time. If Guan Zhongxie rebels in the future, our sister will be implicated and the consequences are unbearable."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Love cannot be forced. What do you want me to do?"

Lord Changping suggested: "We are now openly opposing Lu Buwei so we might as well go all the way. You must fight and defeat Guan Zhongxie. Our sister will never hang around with a loser and this problem will be resolved automatically."

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: "If I defeated Guan Zhongxie to marry Lu Niang Rong, I'd rather concede the fight."

Lord Changwen laughed: "Relax! Lu Buwei will never marry his favourite daughter to you. You need not fight him openly but just prove yourself to be better than him in one way or another. This will increase your prestige and lower Guan Zhongxie's. Our sister will then recognise who is the real hero."

In a begging tone, Lord Changping implored: "The most arrogant people in Xianyang City now are the men from the Premier Mentor Residence. Everyone hates them to the core. If Shaolong can stand up to them, it will be helping the Crown Prince too. In fact, every one of us is waiting for you to

come back and lead us against them.”

Xiang Shaolong forced himself to brighten up and bitterly smiled after some thought: “All right. Reserve a table tonight at the Drunken Wind Brothel and insist on Dan Meimei and Guiyan to be our companions. We shall create a scene there tonight and demand my rightful Flying Dragon Spear at the same time.”

Both men were delighted and hurriedly left to see to the arrangements.

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to slip back to the Wu Residence. Whilst inquiring about Zhou Liang, he discovered that he has left to look for the King Eagle and has yet to return despite having left six months ago. Slightly worried, he looked for Zhou Wei instead.

Probably due to the nourishment of Wu Guo’s love, Zhou Wei is looking great and her beauty became even more outstanding. When she met Xiang Shaolong, she retains some sense of awkwardness.

After getting her seated, Xiang Shaolong enquired; “Why is your brother away for so long?”

Zhou Wei explained: “To find the best hunting eagles, elder brother needs to go far to the northern regions. The journey to and back requires at least four months and time is also needed to search for eaglets. Luck plays a part too.”

Xiang Shaolong was perplexed: “I needed his help now, what should I do?”

Zhou Wei brightened up: “I may lack his true expertise but my knowledge is not too shabby too. May I know what kind of assistance do you require?”

Xiang Shaolong suspiciously scanned her confident expression: “You know how to build ships too? It is more than just basic shipbuilding, it is actually... I don’t know what to say.”

Zhou Wei gleefully assured: “Master can speak his mind. Shipbuilding is a strong tradition in our family and the skill is passed on to both males and females. My shipbuilding skills are not inferior compared to my brother.”

It is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to brighten up and he revealed his plans about the Black Dragon.

Zhou Wei frowned heavily upon hearing his plans. After some consideration, she pointed: “It is not difficult to build a submerged vessel but it is hard to provide continuous air supply. If they surfaced to breathe, we will be exposed.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “I thought about this too but it is not something impossible. The human head can be concealed below the skin of the dragon and some breathing holes can be made. Moreover, we will base the dragon far away from shore so it is hard for anyone to expose us. However, this dragon needs to have good buoyancy and must be easy to fix and dismantle underwater. That should be all we need.”

Zhou Wei cheered: “Leave this to me. Ah, this is wonderful; I can finally contribute something for Master.”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased: "Is Wu Guo treating you well?"

Her cheeks glowing red, Zhou Wei kneeled down: "Master, please decide my future for me."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "It is settled then. It is time for Wu Guo to settle down too."

Returning back to the inner hall, he told Wu Tingfang about Wu Guo and Zhou Wei's marriage. Wu Tingfang is more than happy and took up the heavy responsibility of arranging their marriage.

Xiang Shaolong played with Xiang Bao'er for a while and heaped praises on Ji Yanran before taking a shower with the Tian sisters. He then head back to the Cavalry Command Centre.

Regardless of rank and experience, every Cavalry soldier is full of respect for Xiang Shaolong for his heroics. Everyone greeted him most sincerely.

Back at his office, Jing Jun was nowhere to be found.

Teng Yi explained: "Little Jun has gone to look for Lu Dan'er. Ai, I nearly forgot. He wanted me to beg you to propose marriage on his behalf. I think he is taking this relationship very seriously!"

Xiang Shaolong was elated: "As long as Lu Dan'er does not object, it shouldn't be an issue. But Wang He should propose marriage instead of me given the prestige of the Lu Family is Xianyang City."

Teng Yi agreed: “Lu Dan’er is now madly in love with Little Jun so she will never object. It is best that you propose marriage with Wang He. This will prove our sincerity in uniting these two lovebirds.”

Sitting down, Xiang Shaolong nodded in consent.

Teng Yi updated: “I have assigned favourable positions to Zhao Da and his brothers which Lord Changping has gladly approved. We are fortunate to have him as our Left Premier; otherwise, it will be difficult for us to get anything done.”

Xiang Shaolong twinkled: “We have a more powerful method to undermine Lu Buwei’s authority.” He went on to detail his plan about the fake dragon.

Teng Yi praised: “This method is better than beating him up. Since he hanged the gold reward upon the city gates, I have been taking precautions against a rebellion. This plan should be carried out as soon as possible. When do you plan to execute this?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “Immediately after the dragon event, we can proceed to change the court administration. It is best to wait for the Spring Festival. So we have to produce our dragon within these two months.”

Teng Yi commented: “It is not advisable to let Guan Zhongxie be the Imperial Infantry Commander. We should remove him from this post as soon as possible. Little Jun has told me that the people of the Premier Mentor Residence are running amok and oppressing the common folks all because of Guan Zhongxie shielding them. This is so infuriating.”

Xiang Shaolong recalled the good old days in the 21st century when he was creating trouble and getting into fights too. He laughed: “They think they are tough? We’ll show them who calls the shots. Is Second Brother free tonight to join me in creating a scene at the Drunken Wind Brothel?”

Teng Yi burst out laughing and happily nodded: “My hands are itching already and I have been training hard over the past six months. I would have challenged Guan Zhongxie to a duel myself if not for you.”

Checking the sky, Xiang Shaolong decided: “We shall meet at the brothel two hours later. Now, I am going to speak to Meng Ao privately. If I can turn him against Lu Buwei, it will be an additional bonus.”

After dismissing his attendants, Meng Ao stared at Xiang Shaolong for a moment and sighed: “If Official Xiang is here to say anything negative about Premier Mentor, you can save the trouble.”

Pausing for a while, his eyes shone with a tinge of apology before he plainly added: “I am a Qi native and am heavily discriminated in Qin. Wherever I go, I was ridiculed and suffered numerous humiliations. It is only when I work for Premier Mentor did I have the chance to hold my head up high again. My gratitude for him is tremendous. He may be unscrupulous but given all that he has done for me, even if he wants me and my two sons to die for him, I will not have the slightest resistance. If not for Shaolong doing your best to protect my two sons, I will not let you take a single step into my General Residence. But this is the last time too.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “So General knows about that incident.”

With pain shooting out of his eyes, Meng Ao slowly nodded: "I did interrogate Meng Wu and Meng Tian about the ambush along the river. Naturally, I knew that something is amiss. It is a past event now and I do not wish to bring the past up. Grand Tutor Xiang, I won't see you out!"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect him to be so fiercely loyal to Lu Buwei. Angered, he stood up and simply warned: "To each his own. I do not want to force you but I should tell you that you need to draw a line between your loyalty to Qin and your loyalty to Lu Buwei. Otherwise, all your descendants will not be spared. Goodbye!" Finishing, he strode in large steps towards the main door.

Meng Ao roared: "Hold it!"

Xiang Shaolong held his step and coldly challenged: "You want me to leave my head behind?"

Meng Ao stood up and remarked in a deep voice: "I differentiate between gratitude and grudges and I detest lowly behaviour too. Premier Mentor may be greedy for power but it is to safeguard his life too. According to history, every foreigner who becomes the Premier of Qin suffers a fate worse than death. Premier Mentor was forced to do what he had to do. If Shaolong can let go of the past, I can persuade Premier Mentor to..."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head and bitterly laughed: "It is too late. Ever since he murdered Princess Qian and the rest, our debt can only be settled with blood. Moreover, he poisoned King Zhuangxiang, assassinated Xu Xian and caused Lu Gong to die of anger. Now, he has incurred the wrath of the Crown

Prince and the Qin Military. General Meng better pray that he succeeds in his rebellion. Otherwise, your entire household will be executed. I have said my piece and any more words are unnecessary.”

Apparently, Meng Ao has no idea that Lu Buwei is behind King Zhuangxiang and Xu Xian’s death. His face changing colour, he stammered: “What did you say?”

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loudly and his laughter carried utmost grief. Ignoring Meng Ao, he stepped out of the house.

Human silhouettes suddenly appeared. The two brothers Meng Wu and Meng Tian leapt out from his left and right respectively. Kneeling down in front of him, they cried out in unison: “Grand Tutor!”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: “Are you eavesdropping on us?”

Their eyes red, they nodded their heads furiously.

Xiang Shaolong went forward and helped them up, whispering: “You must never let your father know about this. Come and look for me after a few days!” He then left.

Entering the Drunken Wind Brothel, a middle-aged woman who still maintain her complexion fairly well came up to him. Accompanied by four maids, she joyfully welcomed: “Welcome Official Xiang! I am Chunhua (Spring Flower).”

The four maids stepped forward and helped to take off his coat as part of

their premium customer service.

Xiang Shaolong plainly questioned: “Has Brothel Owner Wu passed away due to sickness? Why didn’t he welcome me personally?”

Chunhua replied awkwardly: “He is indeed unwell and is resting at home. He should be fine after a couple of days of rest.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed to himself, knowing that Wu Fu has intentionally avoided him and went to beg Lu Buwei to protect his life and business. Turning to the Guardians, he bellowed: “Brothel Owner Wu is treating today. Please go ahead and have as much fun as possible but do remember not to consume any poisonous food or wine.”

Jing Shan and the rest understood his intentions and cheered loudly in unison, squeezing into the inner chambers of the brothel. Chunhua hurriedly ordered more staff to attend to them and at the same time protested in fear: “Official Xiang must be joking. How can there be any poison in our food and wine?”

Keeping his cool, Xiang Shaolong shot back: “You have to ask Miss Guiyan that question. Is she sick too?”

Chunhua lowered her head and softly answered: “She has been reserved by Official Guan and will only accompany him tonight. I have already told Lord Changping.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “So Dan Meimei has been reserved by Premier

Mentor?”

Chunhua panicked: “She was reserved by Official Lao.”

Xiang Shaolong was surprised and coldly snorted: “I will ask them about this personally. Meanwhile, you better tell Brothel Owner Wu that if I do not see him within one hour, I will close down this brothel and this day next year will be his death anniversary. Hng!”

Sniggering to himself, he strode forward in large steps.

Her face totally devoid of colour, a trembling Chunhua walked in front to guide him.

The banquet destination today is on the second floor of the main brothel building which is also the most luxurious area of the brothel. Unlike the isolated dining building, the second floor holds twenty over tables and is similar to the modern wedding ballroom except that it is much more spacious.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived, more than ten tables are already occupied with numerous people in flamboyant clothes and it was a boisterous scene.

There is a fireplace in every corner of the hall, making the place warm and cosy.

Upon seeing Xiang Shaolong, nearly half of those present rose and paid their

respects.

Xiang Shaolong scanned the room quickly and discovered that Guan Zhongxie and Lao Ai are also seated at the VIP area. It may be a simple coincidence or some prearrangement that their two tables are located on the left and right of Lord Changping's table.

What really pissed him off is that Ying Ying is actually seated at Guan Zhongxie's table. With Guiyan, she was seated right beside Guan Zhongxie.

Ying Ying apparently did not expect to see Xiang Shaolong in such a place. Flustered, she lost her bearings and did not dare to face him.

Xiang Shaolong bore a new hatred, knowing that Guan Zhongxie purposely brought her here to make the Changping brothers and him look bad.

He laughed loudly and waved his hand to show his appreciation at the show of respect. As he walked towards his own table, he noticed Jing Jun was present too and was busy winking at him.

Leaving his companion Dan Meimei, Lao Ai welcomed Xiang Shaolong with a smile: "A rare visitor indeed! I never imagine that I will ever meet Official Xiang in a place like this."

Xiang Shaolong intimately held his arm and pulled him to a nearby fireplace, smiling: "Let me make a wild guess first, Official Lao must have suddenly received Dan Meimei's invitation so you made the trip here tonight. Am I right?"

Lao Ai was blown away: “How in the world did you know that?”

Xiang Shaolong casually replied: “It’s easy. I am here tonight to settle some scores with Wu Fu. Dan Meimei and Guiyan are implicated too so they must quickly find someone else to accompany them. If I come into conflict with Official Lao, then we will both fall into Dan Meimei and Lu Buwei’s trap. Official Lao should understand what I mean!”

Lao Ai was slightly dazed for a while before gritting his teeth: “How dare that b1tch make use of me! I will make her pay for this!”

Xiang Shaolong patted his shoulder and comforted: “Do not get agitated. I just want you to understand. Tonight, based on our friendship, I will not make things difficult for Dan Meimei. Friend, just enjoy your wine!”

Passing by Lao Ai’s table, Dan Meimei lowered her head and did not even dare to steal a peep at him.

Seated at the same table are some men who appear to be newly recruited by Lao Ai. They are quite respectful of Xiang Shaolong and their female companions are all eyeing him seductively.

Xiang Shaolong stopped at the table and greeted everyone. He held back his laughter: “After being away for six months, it seems that Meimei has forgotten all about me.”

His expression turning ugly, Lao Ai sat down beside Dan Meimei again and hissed: “This is her biggest flaw which is bad memory. No matter what she

does, she will forget about it in an instant.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that Lao Ai is unhappy with Dan Meimei mainly because Dan Meimei did not tell him that she is quite close to Lu Buwei.

Dan Meimei’s tender frame shook slightly and she raised her delicate face, staring at Xiang Shaolong in fear. She begged: “Official Xiang is a powerful figure. I am sure you will not begrudge a weak girl like me. I will be grateful for your kindness towards me.”

Xiang Shaolong obviously knew that she is putting on an act but find it hard to bully her any further. Smirking, he left for his own table.

Guan Zhongxie stood up immediately and laughed: “How can Official Xiang practise favouritism and not come over to our table for an idle chat too?”

Xiang Shaolong swept his gaze over his table. Except for Ying Ying, Guiyan and the serving maids, there is Zhou Zihen, Lu Chan and three new swordsmen. They must be newly recruited by Lu Buwei.

Judging by their strong concentration and muscular body, all three are top swordsmen.

Ying Ying lowered her head even further. On the other hand, Guiyan smiled charmingly as if she had never poisoned him before.

Xiang Shaolong winked at Teng Yi and the rest before he went over to Guan

Zhongxie's table.

All the men stood up and greeted him.

Guan Zhongxie smiled: "Let me introduce these three new top swordsmen to you. This is Xu Shang from Shangcai in Chu. He is the number one swordsman there."

Shangcai is a military stronghold northwest of Chu. To be the number one swordsman there is not easy. Xiang Shaolong could not help but assess this twenty-odd year old tall and handsome swordsman.

Clasping his hands, Xu Shang greeted: "I have long heard of Commander Xiang's famous name. In the future, I must seek your guidance."

Besides him, a stout and beefy man filled with a strong killing aura greeted: "I am Lian Jiao from Wei."

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "That makes you and Official Guan fellow countrymen."

His eyes shining with cold killing energy, Lian Jiao icily revealed: "Lian Jin is my younger brother."

Guan Zhongxie interrupted: "Official Xiang must not be mistaken. Lian Jiao may be Lian Jin's brother but he only has respect for you for defeating Lian Jin."

Xiang Shaolong's eyes flashed over Lian Jiao and he did not reply.

The final man is tall and thin with a face like a monkey. Among the three men, he is the most collected. He coolly state: "I am Zhao Pu, a Qi native. I was originally serving Prince Xinling in Wei but that was after Official Xiang went to Daliang."

Guiyan encouraged: "Why don't Official Xiang sit down and join us? I can have the honour of toasting you again!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loudly: "Miss Guiyan truly loves to joke. We all know that a wise man will not repeat his mistakes. How can I repeat my mistake then?"

Turning to Guan Zhongxie, he commented: "Official Guan's timing is perfect. The minute you know that I am coming here tonight, you immediately reserved Miss Guiyan. I think you should bring her home and add her to your private collection. That way, there is no way I can win you."

Based on Guan Zhongxie's intelligence and Guiyan's acting, they were still shocked by Xiang Shaolong's 'threatening' words and their faces lost colour instantly.

Ying Ying could sense the strong animosity between Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie and Guiyan. Shaking uncontrollably, she looked up at Xiang Shaolong's face.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "How are you Miss Ying!"

Ying Ying's eyes glowed with fear and her shoulder trembled slightly. She remained silent.

Xiang Shaolong is not interested in her answer at all. He smiled at Guan Zhongxie: "Why isn't Miss Niang Rong besides Brother Guan as well? I have yet to visit her since my return. I have to bother Brother Guan to send my regards to her."

Bursting out in laughter, he ignored the hideous expressions of Ying Ying, Guan Zhongxie and Guiyan and returned back to Lord Changping's table.

Chapter 07

Fixing a Duel Date

After Xiang Shaolong got seated, he noticed that Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are seething with anger. First, they are annoyed at Ying Ying's lack of self-respect and secondly, they were displeased at being passed over by Dan Meimei and Guiyan.

At the end of the day, they are members of Qin Royalty. Even if discounting Lord Changping's position as Premier, their posts as the Commanders of the Palace Guards are already one of the most prestigious positions in Xianyang City.

From this, it shows that Lu Buwei is wielding enormous power in Xianyang City.

Supported by Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can still counter him in the Qin Court but in terms of influence and regarding matters outside the palace, Lu Buwei is the undisputable champion.

Among all the ten odd tables that were occupied, only their table does not have any serving maids.

A shaking Chunhua came up to Xiang Shaolong and gingerly offered: "Shall I get Bailei and Yang Yu to accompany your table?"

Among the top courtesans in the Drunken Wind Brothel, Dan Meimei is the best while the next best three are Guiyan, Bailei and Yang Yu. Lord Changping coldly barked: "Get lost! If Dan Meimei or Guiyan is not coming tonight, the rest of the girls can forget about coming too."

Her face turning deathly pale, Chunhua frantically retreated.

Teng Yi icily shot a look at Guan Zhongxie's table and state in a deep voice: "Guan Zhongxie is here with an ulterior motive. He is out to make us look bad."

Jing Jun leisurely added: "They have another twenty odd men downstairs who all belong to the arrogant group of men terrorizing the Xianyang commoners. If we can teach them a lesson, everyone will only cheer for us."

Xiang Shaolong simply smiled: "That's easy. Jing Shan and the rest are drinking downstairs too. You can tell them to stir up trouble and it is a piece of cake."

Jing Jun was delighted and left to inform them.

Suddenly, a high-pitch protest can be heard from Guan Zhongxie's table and attracted everyone's attention. It was Guan Zhongxie hugging Ying Ying and trying to feed her wine. Ying Ying knew that Xiang Shaolong and the others are watching and refused to yield.

Lord Changping knew that Guan Zhongxie is intentionally provoking them and held back his anger.

Lord Changwen was the one who could not hold it any longer. Standing up, he roared: "Sister! You come over here right now!"

Guan Zhongxie released Ying Ying and folded his arms with a big grin on his face.

Ying Ying stole a look at Xiang Shaolong before lowering her head: "What is it? Let's talk when we get back home!"

Lord Changping is afraid that matters would escalate. Pulling Lord Changwen down to his seat, he sighed: "This is bullshit."

Xiang Shaolong enjoyed a sip of wine and lazily comforted: "The more we get agitated, the cockier Guan Zhongxie becomes. Anyway, I already instructed Wu Fu to come and see me within an hour or I will trash him place. That is Guan Zhongxie's Achilles' Heel"

Hearing this, the two Lords' expression became better looking.

Returning back to his seat, Jing Jun shot Ying Ying an eye and whispered: "Dan'er told me before that this precious sister of our two brothers here is actually in a dilemma. She really loves Third Brother but was afraid of loneliness. Moreover she loves to play and ran into this Casanova. Coupled with Third Brother's absence, she became more and more intertwined with Guan Zhongxie. Look at her eyes if you disbelieve me, there are more pain than joy in them!"

Lord Changping angrily swore: "I just had a big fight with her yesterday. Hei! I

am going to be a good Left Premier and do whatever I can to counter Lu Buwei. Let's see how he dies in the end."

Xiang Shaolong checked: "Have you transferred Wang Jian back to the Capital?"

Lord Changwen reported: "It is still being rejected by Lu Buwei. Wang He is also supporting this but was suppressed by Lu Buwei's Meng Ao and Wang Ci. They said that the Xiong Nu are still active and it is better to be safe than sorry. Empress was frightened at hearing this and dare not support Crown Prince so this issue has been dragging on."

Jing Jun groaned: "Huan Yi is worse off! Military spending is controlled by Lu Buwei and his budget has been compromised here and there, restricting his work performance. We must quickly solve this problem for him."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Have more patience! When the Black Dragon appears, it will be the start of his decline. By then, he will be too busy countering Lao Ai."

Lord Changwen and Jing Jun do not know anything about the Black Dragon and enquired further.

Teng Yi affirmed: "Let's talk about this later!" Pointing to his back, he laughed: "Third Brother's old friend is here."

Everyone looked to where he is pointing.

True enough, Wu Fu is here.

As he walked over, he greeted and mingled with the other guests as usual without any fear. He seems to be confident with the backing of Guan Zhongxie.

Passing by Lao Ai's table, this fellow displayed even more intimacy but at Xiang Shaolong's table, he stood a distance away and reported: "After knowing that Official Xiang is looking for me, I underwent a miracle recovery. Ai! I have let you down as the Spear was being stolen at night and that is the reason for my sickness."

Everyone glanced at one another after hearing his words, thinking that this man is outrageously irresponsible. But this must be Lu Buwei's and Guan Zhongxie's idea to not let Xiang Shaolong have the spear no matter what. Without their support, Wu Fu will never display such insolence.

Xiang Shaolong plainly replied: "Since the treasure is lost, I have the responsibility to investigate this crime. Brother Owner Wu must now come back with me to the Command Centre and provide all the evidence. I will get my Cavalry Army to get the Spear back at all costs."

Wu Fu's face lost some colour and could foresee his own death at the Command Centre. He hurriedly countered: "I appreciate Commander Xiang's efforts but I have decided not to pursue this matter. Moreover, it was stolen on the night I presented it to you and it is more than six months ago."

Jing Jun barked: "How dare you! The Spear belongs to Commander Xiang and

who are you to decide if this matter should be pursued or not? You are obviously trying to make things difficult for us. You must have had a hand in this matter and is now trying to cover your tracks.”

Lord Changping coldly interjects: “According to the Great Laws of Qin, failure to report a crime is punishable by execution. Brothel Owner Wu is showing disrespect to our laws and is hiding this crime. This is unforgiveable and death is too light for you.”

All the colour gone from his face, Wu Fu’s legs turned to jelly and he kneeled down on the ground but his eyes were looking at Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie did not expect Xiang Shaolong and company to turn Wu Fu’s words against himself. Standing up, he offered: “As the Imperial Infantry Commander, I am in charge of all matters within the City. Will Official Xiang please hand this matter to me and I will give you a satisfactory reply.”

Everyone in the hall can feel the animosity in the air. All the activities have stopped and everyone is paying attention to the proceedings.

The hall is completely silent and the atmosphere is filled with Guan Zhongxie’s domineering voice.

Lord Changping smiled: “Just by looking at the time of the theft, we can deduce that the criminal has something against Official Xiang and there must be a spy involved. Moreover, the spear may have been transported out of the City by now. As Premier, I think Official Xiang must handle this matter personally. Official Guan need not trouble yourself.”

Based on Guan Zhongxie's calm demeanour, his face did not change colour at all. He knew that Lord Changping is the Left Premier of Qin and is many ranks higher than him. Moreover, he is in charge of the Qin military administration. If Guan Zhongxie continues to speak out, it is equivalent to insubordination.

Because of these factors, Guan Zhongxie was momentarily speechless.

Thinking about his imminent execution, Wu Fu's teeth begin to chatter and his entire body was shaking.

Ying Ying's position has always been undefined. Now, she finally realised that Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie are on extreme opposing ends against Xiang Shaolong, her two brothers and the Crown Prince. Stuck in the centre, she was in an awkward situation and could not help but felt regretful.

In this moment, Dan Meimei rose from her seat and came to Wu Fu's side. Kneeling down too, she declared in a shrill voice: "If the charge is not reporting a known crime, then everyone in this brothel is guilty. Premier and Commander Xiang can punish all of us."

Guiyan hurriedly came over and kneeled on the other side of Wu Fu.

Now, it is Lord Changping and the rest who are in a tight situation. It is hard for them to persecute the entire brothel occupants over a petty theft.

Lao Ai is feeling uncomfortable too. After all, Dan Meimei is his woman. If Xiang Shaolong executed her, he would lose face too.

Guan Zhongxie returned back to his seat and there was a cold smirk hanging at the edge of his mouth. He wanted to see how Xiang Shaolong is able to clean up the present mess.

Still maintaining his leisurely and aloof expression, Xiang Shaolong simply state: "There is a debtor behind every debt. Wu Fu is the main instigator behind the entire episode. He was the one who gave me the spear and since the spear is lost, he should be the one who informed me. Now, he did not report the loss to me and is being uncooperative now so we are charging him with being a possible accomplice. I wonder why are the two ladies insisting on shouldering the same blame; is there something more than meets the eye?"

Dan Meimei and Guiyan did not expect Xiang Shaolong to have such a sharp tongue and were dumbfounded.

Wu Fu knew that things have gone terribly wrong and he was in an extreme state of anxiety. He stammered: "Please give me some time. I am sure I can retrieve the Flying Dragon Spear."

Teng Yi laughed loudly: "In this case, the spear and shield must have been hidden by Brothel Owner Wu himself. Otherwise, you would not dare to make such a commitment!"

Wu Fu knew that he has slipped. Knocking his head on the floor repeatedly, he begged: "It is all my fault! It is all my fault!"

Guan Zhongxie and his men were filled with hatred, wishing they could tear

Wu Fu into pieces.

Lao Ai interrupted: “Will Official Xiang be forgiving and forget this episode if Brothel Owner Wu manages to hand over the spear and shield?”

Taking this chance to stand down, Xiang Shaolong agreed: “Since Official Lao has spoken, I shall accept this suggestion.”

Lao Ai gestured and two of his men stood up and lifted Wu Fu away.

Dan Meimei and Guiyan finally got a taste of Xiang Shaolong’s prowess. Slowly flashing their eyes at him, they returned back to their seats.

Before they managed to sit down, sounds of fighting and cutlery smashing can be heard from the ground floor.

Xiang Shaolong and his friends smiled, knowing that Jing Shan and his men has begun causing trouble.

The main hall at the ground floor was in a complete mess as if a hurricane has just passed by. The ground was littered with broken furniture, cutlery, spilled wine and dishes.

Half of the Eighteen Guardians were slightly injured but their enemies are in a pathetic state. All the twenty three warriors of Guan Zhongxie were heavily injured and more than half of them are unconscious. Although there were no fatal injuries among them, everyone suffered from broken bones and fractured joints. This shows that Wu Yan Zhu and his fellow Guardians have

been lenient.

Witnessing the armageddon before his eyes, Guan Zhongxie bellowed: “What in the world happened?”

One of the men who is supposedly the leader of the men stood out. With one hand nursing his bleeding nose, he pointed at Jing Shan and reported: “This kid exchanged a flirtatious look with one of our ladies. So we...”

Guan Zhongxie roared: “Shut up!”

Wu Guang shrugged his shoulders at Xiang Shaolong, declaring: “They are the ones who attacked first. We are only defending ourselves!”

Guan Zhongxie knew that Jing Shan and the rest are intentionally out to cause trouble but was powerless to do anything as it was his men who attacked first.

Ying Ying slipped away and stood in between her two elder brothers. The two Lords treated her as if she was invisible and did not even acknowledge her presence.

Guan Zhongxie commanded his men to carry the injured away and apologised solemnly to Xiang Shaolong. He coldly invited: “During the hunting festival, we had a duel that ended in a draw. May I know when are you free to exchange pointers again and also decide Third Mistress’s future?”

The noisy crowd of onlookers and brothel guests immediately became quiet.

Everyone knew that Guan Zhongxie is really incensed and took this chance to challenge Xiang Shaolong.

Duelling is forbidden among military officers but this matter concerns Lu Niang Rong's hand in marriage and there was a precedent so even Xiao Pan cannot interfere with this duel.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Official Guan can fix the time and place. Even if you want to duel now, I will be happy to comply."

Everyone's attention turned to Guan Zhongxie.

Before Guan Zhongxie can say a single word, Ying Ying screamed and tore to the front. Standing in between Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie, she protested: "Please do not fight!"

Everyone was puzzled.

In Xianyang City, Ying Ying is known for her fighting skills. Moreover, she loves challenging people to fights and enjoys watching others fight too. Now, her violent objection makes it hard for everyone to comprehend her motives.

Xiang Shaolong simply shrugged his shoulders: "I am not the one pushing for this duel. If Miss Ying wishes to stop this fight, you can speak to Official Guan privately. Please forgive me for being unable to help you."

Ying Ying looked at him intimately and replied in a grieved voice: "When two tigers fight, severe injuries will be inflicted. You can choose not to accept the

challenge and no one can force you. You must purposely say these provoking words to anger me. After all the trouble tonight, aren't you very imposing already?"

Annoyed, Xiang Shaolong coldly laughed: "Is Miss trying to stop the fight because we are not fighting over you?"

Stomping her foot fiercely once on the floor, with a loud Wah! Ying Ying broke out into tears and ran non-stop towards the door.

Teng Yi winked at Jing Jun and Jing Jun hurriedly chased after her.

Still maintaining his composure, Guan Zhongxie casually state: "The twentieth of next month is Premier Mentor Lu's birthday. We shall have out duel then and add to the festivities too."

Footsteps are sounded and Lao Ai's men returned with Wu Fu carrying the Flying Dragon Spear and shield.

Receiving the spear and shield, Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: "It is settled then. On that day, I shall use this spear to test your formidable skills."

The onlookers burst out in wild cheering.

Guan Zhongxie's face lost some colour. Since the last fight, he has already figured out Xiang Shaolong's sword skills and has been working hard over the past six months to counter it. Now, Xiang Shaolong is using a spear instead of a sword so all his hard work has just gone down the drain.

Xiang Shaolong was laughing secretly inside.

He has more than one month to train until the duel date. He is confident of learning Yanran's invincible spear skills.

Only with this kind of heavy attacking weapon can he successfully counter Guan Zhongxie's amazing arm strength.

This is called flexibility in warfare.

He has depended on strategy to win the last fight and it will also be strategy that he needs to win this fight.

There is no other way out.

Chapter 08

Expressing Love

The next day, Xiang Shaolong went to pay his respects to Lu Gong and Xu Xian before entering the palace to see Xiao Pan to report his duel with Guan Zhongxie. Finally, he went to see Qin Qing at the Qin Residence.

Qin Qing is in her garden admiring the snow and was delighted to receive him but shy at the same time. Hesitating to look straight into his eyes, she simply swept him off his feet.

Strolling in the snow shoulder to shoulder, there were no intimate actions but they can both feel the intimacy in each others' heart.

Xiang Shaolong gently revealed: "At Lu Buwei's birthday dinner next month is the day I will fight Guan Zhongxie to death."

Shocked, Qin Qing wailed: "You! Why did you have to fight him?"

Xiang Shaolong answered: "This man is talented, intelligent and is holding the post of the Imperial Infantry Commander. If I do not eliminate him, we will have many days of trouble in the future."

Lowering her hood, Qin Qing halted and whined: "If you lose... Ai! I am so worried."

Xiang Shaolong turned around and leaned his head towards her, scrutinizing her flawless beauty and smiled: "If I happened to forfeit my life during the duel, what will you do?"

Her face becoming pale, Qin Qing shook: "Please do not speak like this. Do you think I am not frightened already?"

Xiang Shaolong insisted: "Grand Tutor Qin has yet to reply me."

Qin Qing shot him a look and lowered her head, replying softly: "I will join you in death! Happy?"

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: "Grand Tutor Qin!"

Qin Qing shook her head and sighed: "To think I will actually say such things to a man. But I know you will not lose, right? Xiang Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Of course I will not lose! If I am not confident, I will just admit my loss. What can he do about it?"

Pausing, he added: "I am here today to sincerely invite Grand Tutor Qin to stay at the farm for a month. Because I need to disregard everything and focus on training to prepare for the duel next month. But I know I cannot forget about you and to avoid the pain of pining for you, I have to request that you be by my side."

In an instant, even the root of Qin Qing's ears is completely red. Lowering her head embarrassedly, she clarified: "Xiang Shaolong, do you know that by

making this request, it is as good as asking me to marry you?”

Xiang Shaolong reached out and held her white and tender shoulders before gently replying: “Of course I know. Please forgive my callousness but I want to win both your heart and your body. If either one is lacking, I will not accept it.”

Qin Qing struggled slightly and wailed: “Are you treating me like a piece of merchandise?”

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward and kissed her cheek, slowly saying: “Whatever. I just want you. We need not deceive ourselves any longer in the future and live life with so many restrictions. Some opportunities are lost forever if they are missed. I have thought very carefully and thoroughly before I come looking for you.”

Qin Qing’s head is so low that it is almost touching her chest. Whispering as soft as a mosquito, she asked: “When are you leaving for the farm?”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “Early tomorrow morning.”

Qin Qing softly pleaded: “Can you release me first?”

Stunned, Xiang Shaolong released his grip on her.

Qin Qing floated away like the breeze and finally stopped at a distance ten feet away from him. She officially state: “I will wait for you here tomorrow! See you then.”

Giving him a romantic and emotional look, she turned around and sashayed away.

An intoxicated Xiang Shaolong stared at her until she disappeared among the flower beds before composing himself and headed towards the Command Centre.

At the Command Centre main door, someone dashed out and detained him. It turned out to be Ying Ying and from her haggard expression, she must have had a bad night's sleep. She started: "Official Xiang, I must speak to you privately."

Xiang Shaolong has just expressed his love for Qin Qing and gotten the most wonderful answer. In a great mood, he nodded: "Let's talk more inside!"

Ying Ying stubbornly shook her head: "No! Let's take a walk outside the city!"

Alarm bells begin to ring in Xiang Shaolong's head. With Xu Xian and Lu Gong dead, he is the man Lu Buwei wanted to kill next. Will this be a trap laid by Guan Zhongxie but executed through Ying Ying?

He decided otherwise because no matter how muddle-headed Ying Ying becomes, she will never harm him. He agreed: "All right!"

Turning around, he was about to instruct the Guardians to wait for him at the Command Centre when Wu Yan Zhu stated upfront: "Master Xiang, please forgive us for being unable to comply. The Madams have strictly instructed us to never leave your side."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and relented: "Fine! You can follow behind me."

He proceeded to ride with Ying Ying out of the city.

Riding out of the city gates, his spirits lifted considerably.

The rolling meadows have become a blanket of white snow and they spread out as far as the eye can see. Mother Nature is completely silent and only the snow is shimmering.

The Eighteen Guardians were riding two hundred steps behind them and were taking precautions against any ambushes.

Xiang Shaolong assessed Ying Ying.

Her charming body is even more mesmerizing which is probably due to Guan Zhongxie's nourishment.

Xiang Shaolong wondered how will the already peerless beautiful Qin Qing turn out after his own nourishment?

With this thought running through his head, Xiang Shaolong is more certain than ever than he is only interested in Ying Ying as a friend and not as a lover.

Ying Ying softly asked: "Xiang Shaolong! Please do not fight Zhongxie. As long as you publicly announce that you do not wish to marry Lu Niang Rong and thus rejected the duel, no one will say that you are afraid of him."

Xiang Shaolong agreed that this is an excellent solution. Moreover, he did appear superior during the hunting fair and with marriage as an excuse; no one will think that he is trying to avoid this fight. The problem is that he and Guan Zhongxie has already reached the point of no return, where neither can tolerate the presence of each other.

Just like him and Lu Buwei, only one man can continue living.

Not receiving a reply from him, Ying Ying raised her voice angrily: “You do not love Lu Niang Rong, what is the use of fighting over her?”

Xiang Shaolong was admiring the snow accumulated on the branches of the trees along the official roads. He lightly sighed: “Miss is really protective of Guan Zhongxie. Whatever you do is in his best interests.”

Ying Ying noticed the sarcasm in his voice and was incensed: “Do you think I am not looking after your interests too? While you are away for the past six months, Zhongxie has been practising his sword every day and was waiting for the day he could kill you. Do you think you can still defeat him?”

Xiang Shaolong did not take her words to heart and smiled: “So who do you think will win?”

Ying Ying was so angry her entire face is completely white. She cursed: “I wish both of you are dead.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed loudly: “Let’s return back to the City. You need not say any more.”

Stopping her horse, Ying Ying's face is completely green by now. Staring at him furiously for some time, she softened and intimately coaxed: "It is all my fault for being indecisive. No wonder you are treating me like this. Please listen to me this time, ok?"

Xiang Shaolong seriously state: "Ying Ying, you better come back to your senses and look clearly at the harsh realities in front of you. This is not a personal feud but a fight that concerns the power struggle of the Qin Court and a competition between Qin natives and foreigners. The losing party will stand to have their families annihilated. To Guan Zhongxie, you are just one of his pawns but you are only good at disobeying your brothers' orders to restrict you for your own good. Did you ever spare a thought for them? You are only stubborn, wilful and want others to pander to your selfish needs."

Pausing for a while, he proudly remarked: "Death and defeat is common during fights and this is not the first time Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie are trying to kill me. But you only choose to live in your fantasy world and ignore genuine concerns. If you ever marry Guan Zhongxie, you better pray that Lu Buwei can successfully rebel but that would mean a tragic death for both your brothers. If Lu Buwei fails, you may be spared but all your kids with Guan Zhongxie will be executed. This is the truth and Crown Prince Zheng will not waver. All these circumstances are born out of Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao's schemes. Mo Ao is dead so now Guan Zhongxie is trying to kill me. Do you understand?"

Not paying any more attention to her, he left and re-entered the city.

Before he reached the Command Centre, Xiang Shaolong's mind is already

filled with Qin Qing. Imagining that he can get close to her physically tomorrow, his heart is burning with passion and he wished that time could pass faster.

At the Command Centre, Teng Yi whispered: “Tu Xian will meet you at the usual place later.”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “I was about to look for him!”

Sitting down, Teng Yi reported: “After winter, Meng Ao will attack Han. Your old friend Han Chuang is in trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong helplessly replied: “This is something beyond our control. If we are weak, Han will be attacking us instead. But as long as we are building the Zhengguo Canal, we will lack the resources for a grand campaign. For the next few years, we can only gain one or two provinces from the Three Allied States. By the time they really mount a campaign against the East, we would be long gone.”

Teng Yi sighed: “I know that Third Brother has no interest in war but sooner or later, you will have to field an army too. This is something inevitable.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I have to depend on Second Brother then. I am sure that you are so familiar with the Mozi warfare that you can even memorise it from the back to the front.”

Teng Yi laughed: “You really love to exaggerate.”

Xiang Shaolong inquired: "Is Little Jun out on patrol?"

Teng Yi chided: "He is not so diligent and is out with Lu Dan'er. I told him that you are willing to propose marriage on his behalf and he was so happy that he forgot all about work."

Xiang Shaolong decided: "The Lu Family is still in bereavement. Let's talk about this after I killed Guan Zhongxie! I am going back to the farm tomorrow. Second Brother must spar with me if you are free."

Teng Yi suddenly recalled something: "Shaolong, do you remember the Weinan Martial Arts School?"

Xiang Shaolong searched his mental database and remembered this Martial Arts School was run by this man called Qiu Risheng. In the past, he was conspiring with Lord Yangquan and once sent one of his top fighters 'Scarface' Guoxin to ambush Jing Jun and injured him badly. He himself was almost assassinated by them on the streets.

He nodded: "What about them?"

Teng Yi explained: "After Lord Yangquan was eliminated by Lu Buwei, Qiu Risheng sensed that times are unfavourable so he slipped away. Recently, he resurfaced and is conspiring with Lao Ai. He has been quite prominent lately and is heavily recruiting warriors. Little Jun is itching to lay his hands on them. I am sure there will be some conflict sooner or later."

Xiang Shaolong knew better than anyone that Lao Ai is a despicable cad and

expected him to conspire with other ruthless men. He plainly stressed: "Second Brother must watch Little Jun carefully and we must not act rashly. We will only counter them when the Black Dragon shows itself and we have consolidated our power."

Teng Yi smiled: "Leave this to me. Little Jun has never disobeyed my orders. Third Brother is sharp indeed to predict that Lao Ai will be dissatisfied with his lowly position and possess wild ambitions. For him to accommodate Qiu Risheng, it is as good as clashing with Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "When the Crown Prince has consolidated his power, he will have Lord Changping and Li Si to advise him, Wang Jian and Huan Yi to lead his army. With the Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry in their hands, we can retreat back to the farm and watch Lu Buwei and Lao Ai fight to death."

Teng Yi frowned: "But if this goes on, the Empress and Crown Prince will be enemies one day."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "This is fate which nobody can change. We are helpless too."

Teng Yi was about to say something when an attendant reported that Wang Ci sent someone to summon Xiang Shaolong to see him at the General Residence.

Both men were stunned as Wang Ci did not have any dealings with Xiang Shaolong.

Arriving at the General Residence, Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians noticed that the courtyard in front of the main building was loud and lively. There were nearly a hundred strong men watching Wang Ci practise his archery.

Despite the cold and frosty weather, Wang Ci braved the chill and mounted his strong bow. His three continuous arrows hit the bull's eyes and earned loud cheers from the crowd. This Great General truly lives up to his reputation as one of Qin's famed general. Noticing Xiang Shaolong, he smiled broadly and waved to him. Putting on a fur coat and his shining eyes assessing Jing Shan and the Guardians, he casually remarked: "I heard that these Guardians are very highly skilled. Since they are free, why don't they exchange a few friendly pointers with my men?"

Xiang Shaolong is in no position to reject him and agreed reluctantly.

Wang Ci smiled and led him into the main hall.

The hall is wide and spacious while the walls are decorated with animal skins and weapons. There is a killing aura in the air.

The strangest thing is a seven facade screen south of the hall. The screen has completely blocked the incoming path from within the building. It looks out of place and Xiang Shaolong is reminded of the time when he was peeping at Chu Empress Dowager Li Yanyan. He was discovered by her because of a footprint on the floor so he naturally looked towards the floor. Immediately, sweat poured down his back and his limbs became icy cold.

There were many water marks on the floor. Needless to say, there are many men who have entered the hall from outside and are now hidden behind the screen. As their shoes are tainted with snow, the water marks are left on the floor. They were there because he has arrived and this is a setup meant for him.

They naturally do not have any good intentions.

All they need to do is to push the screen over and shoot out with their crossbows and he will be a dead man.

Wang Ci took up the host seat right in front of the screen and gestured him to sit down on his right. There is no way that he can make the first move and attack Wang Ci first.

His mind thinking furiously, he gritted his teeth and sat down. In the process, he secretly retrieved five flying needles and hid them in his giant hand.

He has never been so close to death.

Wang Ci is truly intelligent to get his men to occupy the Guardians so that he is alone and defenceless.

Why does Wang Ci want to kill him?

Wang Ci is unlike Meng Ao and is a Qin native. He may be an admirer of Lu Buwei but will eventually be loyal to Xiao Pan.

Thinking about this, he had an inspiration.

Two maids came up to serve tea and excused themselves. When only the two of them are left, Wang Ci suspiciously assessed him for a while before sighing: “This year has been pretty eventful. First, Lord Gaoling rebelled and Xu Xian and Lu Gong died one after another. I find it hard to accept these facts myself.”

Xiang Shaolong does not understand the meaning behind his words so he kept his silence.

Pain shooting out of his eyes, Wang Ci lamented: “It is Lu Gong’s dream to see Qin conquer the six eastern states and unite the world. Just when things are taking a positive turn, his life ended. This is truly tragic.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but added: “As long as we are having internal conflict, it is impossible for us to unite the world.”

His eyes flashing, Wang Ci mentioned in a deep voice: “This is the reason why I looked for Shaolong. Since Premier Mentor came to Qin, he conquered Eastern Zhou with General Meng Ao and built the three new provinces. Those are strategic locations and now, we are able to threaten Daliang and show off our might to the eastern states. If not for this campaign, it is difficult for Meng Ao and me to attack the three Allied States and conquer Taiyuan from Zhao. When the Five Allied Army came to attack us, it was thanks to Shaolong’s trickery that Prince Xinling was forced to step down and our danger passed. After that, Lu Gong, Meng Ao and I attacked the Allied States and established the Eastern Provinces. Now, Qin is even more prestigious

than before. But right at this point in time, our country is rocked by internal strife and our hands are tied. Shaolong, what do you think we should do?"

Xiang Shaolong finally understood that Wang Ci is trying to mend fences between him and Lu Buwei. He is away fighting most of the time and is not clear about the power struggles in the Qin Court. Ultimately, he has declared his loyalty to Lu Buwei and it is hard to convince him to switch sides. If Xiang Shaolong insisted on his way, the attackers behind the screen may just kill him without the least hesitation. At the same time, he can tell that Wang Ci is not blindly following Lu Buwei's orders.

After some contemplation, he calmly replied: "In the present times, everyone remembers Tian Dan when we speak of Qi, Empress Han Jing when we speak of Zhao and Lu Buwei when we speak of Qin. The Kings of these states seemed to be non-existent. This is called: Thick trees carry thick branches, remove the branches and the tree is powerless. With officials carrying too much power, the King of the State is powerless like the branchless tree..." He just learned the last four lines from Li Si and managed to put them to good use in this desperate situation.

An impatient Wang Ci interrupted: "This is due to circumstances and not the will of men. The King is young and the country is powerful. Without officials managing the state, the country will be ruined. We have adopted the policy of utilising talented men, paying them handsomely and given them critical posts. Since Xiao gong begun our dynasty, we have capable men like Shang Yang, Zhang Yi, Fan Qiao and now we have Premier Mentor. If not for them, Qin will not enjoy our present success today."

Xiang Shaolong comprehended Wang Ci's train of thought and was wondering if he should tell him about Lu Buwei murdering King Zhuangxiang and Xu Xian when Wang Ci continued: "Lu Gong and Xu Xian has always suspected Premier Mentor of poisoning the two late kings and even suspected that Crown Prince Zheng is Lu Buwei and Empress Ji's illegitimate son. It is now proven that Crown Prince Zheng is not related to Lu Buwei so all these are just blatant rumours."

Xiang Shaolong was blown away, realising that behind every gain, there is a loss too. The blood test has indirectly caused Wang Ci to not suspect Lu Buwei the traitor at all. In turn, he has become the main culprit in Wang Ci's eyes and a stumbling block in the way of Qin's unification of the world.

Wang Ci sighed again: "Premier Mentor is a most talented individual. Just by reading his Spring-Autumn Annals and his reward hanging on the city gates, I believe he has surpassed Shang Yang."

Xiang Shaolong decided to show hand: "How can there be any piece of work that is so good that it cannot be improved on? I think people fear his authority and dared not correct his work. There is something I will say but I am afraid that you will not believe me. Xu Xian may be killed by Chu but it was instigated by Tian Dan. Now why would Tian Dan do such a thing? We only need to do some self-reflection and ask ourselves: Who will gain the most from his death in Qin? I believe General can easily guess who the mastermind is."

Wang Ci was shaken: "Do you have any proof?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “How am I going to produce any proof? But Lu Gong was so incensed over this murder he died of anger. On his deathbed, he begged Crown Prince and me to avenge him. Given the present circumstances, General must choose to be loyal to Crown Prince or Lu Buwei. There is no other choice. Lu Buwei has been propagating his Spring-Autumn Annals because he wanted to spread the influence of Officials holding power. If I possess any selfish motives against Lu Buwei, I would not have rejected the position of Premier twice and allowed others to be promoted.” He is on the brink of death and did not bother to conceal any details.

Wang Ci’s face changed colour and his eyes shone sharply, scanning him with suspicion.

Xiang Shaolong coldly exchanged stares with him with neither hostility nor fear. In his mind, he was thinking of how to flip the table to block the arrows and escape with his life.

Wang Ci’s gaze shifted up and he stared at the main pillar supporting the hall. His eyes are filled with contemplation and he unsteadily commented: “Xu Xian, Lu Gong and I have always admired you Xiang Shaolong. Otherwise, I would not have asked you over for a discussion. For the time being, I am unable to agree with your theories. Nonetheless, my loyalties lie with the Crown Prince. I will try to talk to Premier Mentor personally and hope that he will not end up like Shang Yang who is executed by five horses running in five separate directions and tearing his body apart.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “You must never do this. If Lu Buwei senses that General is having doubts about him, he will try to get rid of you. All I

desire is for General to follow your righteous principles and support all the policies that will benefit our country. That is a blessing to us already.”

Wang Ci was moved: “Shaolong, you are definitely not an unscrupulous man. If you are trying to convince me to turn against Lu Buwei, you will not leave here alive. Meng Ao has told Lu Buwei everything you told him today. Based on that, you have displayed insubordination and Lu Buwei can actually annihilate your household.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief at this close shave. He has been too reckless and did not expect Meng Ao to be dead loyal to Lu Buwei. It is also clear that Wang Ci has been ordered by Lu Buwei to kill him.

If Wang Ci is his killer, even Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji are powerless to hold it against him.

Wang Ci bitterly laughed: “So I can either choose to kill you or fight beside you. There is no third option. If I join hands with Meng Ao, you are just a measly Cavalry Commander who cannot resist us. But relax! You did not try to get me to counter Lu Buwei but Lu Buwei is dead set on killing you. But as long as I disagreed, he dare not act on his own. Hng! If I choose to take precautions against him, what can he do about it?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief but could not resist clarifying: “I thought General mentioned that it is hard to accept my theories. Why did you still change your mind?”

His eyes shining with humour, he warmly answered: “Because I suddenly

remembered that Shaolong came to see me without any reservations and speak with reason in a guilt-free manner. In addition, the late King, Crown Prince, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Wang He, Lord Changping and Wang Jian have all treated you with trust, love and respect. It is all because of your selfless attitude. So I was suddenly enlightened and did not commit a serious error. I still have my doubts about your words but I will not trust Lu Buwei as wholeheartedly as before.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling emotional.

In this moment, he knows that the power vacuum left behind with the deaths of Xu Xian and Lu Gong is now being filled by Wang Ci who has miraculously switched sides to support them. Otherwise, it is hard for him to stay alive, not to mention deal with Lu Buwei.

Wang Ci has abandoned his plan to kill him as he finally realises that Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei has come to a stage of non-reconciliation. At the end of the day, he has chosen to support his own King. After all, he is a Qin native and would never conspire with outsiders to harm his own country.

Chapter 09

A Startling Discovery

After listening to his near-death account at Wang Ci's residence, Xiao Pan sighed with relief: "That was too close!"

For the longest time, Xiang Shaolong hasn't seen him expressing genuine concern and was touched. He gladly added: "There is a reason behind everything. If not for you, Xu Xian and Lu Gong supporting me, Wang Ci would have killed me without giving me a chance to speak out. Moreover, the Qin military has always been loyal to the Crown Prince and thus, Wang Ci is able to abandon the dark side and join us. Otherwise, it is hard to overcome Lu Buwei indeed! Ai! Maybe this is what we call fate."

Xiao Pan nodded: "Master must quickly work on the Black Dragon before Lu Buwei has the chance to transfer Wang Ci away. Meng Ao alone is more than enough to deal with you. Ai! Does Master really need to retreat to the farms? I am concerned that Lu Buwei may send his warriors to attack the farm. If he gets his men to be disguised as horse thieves, it is hard for me to pin the blame on him"

Xiang Shaolong was secretly astounded. At the same time, he resolved to increase his defences and put more emphasis on spying and intelligence gathering. Otherwise, his household may be annihilated. Moreover, he has to send half his Wu Family Elite Army to the northern border to support Wu Zhuo.

Xiao Pan remarked with frustration: “Using the excuse that the Zhengguo Canal is lacking funds, he has been delaying money shipments to Huan Yi’s new army. Up till today, they are only able to recruit one thousand men and did not have proper armour or weapons. Otherwise, I would get them to relocate near the farms and support you if necessary.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “Crown Prince can put your mind at ease. I have sufficient strength to protect myself. With Wang Ci countering Lu Buwei and Meng Ao, there is only so much they can do. No matter what, we must try our best to keep Wang Ci in Xianyang City before the Black Dragon sighting to check Lu Buwei’s influence.”

Xiao Pan sighed helplessly and changed the topic: “This morning, Empress summoned me and gave me a tongue-lashing, chiding me for keeping secrets from her. I am so pissed. She is not behaving herself and she doesn’t deserve my respect. A mother like her is as good as none.”

Xiang Shaolong knew that the gap between him and Zhu Ji is widening, forcing Zhu Ji to be increasingly reliant on Lao Ai. The real reason is that Xiao Pan is influenced by Lady Ni’s image of a self-respecting mother and cannot tolerate Zhu Ji and Lao Ai’s scandalous relationship.

Only he would really understand this circumstance.

Xiao Pan inquired: “Is Master ready to marry Grand Tutor Qin? She came to inform Empress and me earlier that she is going to stay at the farm with you for a month or so. Hei! I am really happy for you. If Lao Ai or Lu Buwei ends up with her, I will vomit blood.”

Xiang Shaolong understood that Xiao Pan has shifted his affections and respect to Qin Qing.

Lady Ni's death is the biggest lack in Xiao Pan's life. First, Zhu Ji took her place, followed by Qin Qing, providing him with a motherly figure in his life.

Xiao Pan cheerfully revealed: "For the past six months, Lao Ai and Lu Buwei have been creating opportunities to be close to her. Fortunately, Grand Tutor Qin ignored all their advances. Hee! Grand Tutor Qin loves talking to me and she always tells me how heroic you are! Hng! Lu Buwei has been offering me many beauties but they have all been rejected by me. I will not be tricked by him!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "If I marry Grand Tutor Qin, not only Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will be jealous to death but I will also incur the wrath of many people."

Xiao Pan shook his head: "Times have changed. Now, Master has become the heroic icon of Qin. When Master fields an army and win a few g0dd@mn blo0dy battles, I can confer Master to be a Lord or a Marquis. At that point in time, no one can voice any dissatisfaction if you marry Grand Tutor Qin."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Those vulgarities must have been suppressed in your heart for a long time! We shall speak of this later. When the Black Dragon is sighted, we will use this chance to change the palace administration. Is Crown Prince going to promote Li Si to be the Administrative Premier?"

Xiao Pan thought for a while and frowned: "I am afraid that Empress will not

support my decision! If possible, I would want Master to take up this post.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big fright and is certain that he could not live up to the expectations of this post. He hurriedly suggested: “I think I am more suited to hold a military post. Relax! The power of the Black Dragon is without question. I have already sent my men to invite Zou Yan back to Xianyang City. When he personally announces that Crown Prince is the new Chosen One, it will be an earth-shattering event and even Empress cannot object. By then, Crown Prince can assume full authority and we can watch Empress and Lao Ai fight Lu Buwei. On your coronation day, we will eliminate all of them in one blow.”

Xiao Pan bitterly smiled: “But that is the day Master will leave me.”

Xiang Shaolong seriously advised: “We are earthshaking figures and do not focus on such petty matters. As long as you utilise Li Si and Wang Jian well, you can unite the world. Crown Prince must forget everything about me and the shadow of your past will be gone forever.”

Xiao Pan’s red reddened and he gasped: “Why is Master so good to me? You are absolutely selfless.”

Xiang Shaolong muttered: “You know the reason better than anyone.”

Xiao Pan was very touched: “I understand. Actually, I have regarded Master as my Father a long ago.”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden strong urge to burst out crying. From a

nameless Zhao boy to become the awe-inspiring Qin Shi Huang who will unite the whole of China is already something unimaginable.

Moreover, he shared such an intimate relationship with him.

In this instant, an attendant came to report that the Empress has summoned Xiang Shaolong.

Both men exchanged a glance, guessing that the matter is probably related to Qin Qing.

Zhu Ji received him in the tranquil inner hall of the Empress Palace. After dismissing her attendants, she stood up and walked to Xiang Shaolong's front and assessed him for some time. Finally, she gently asked: "Xiang Shaolong, please be honest with me. In what ways am I inferior to Qin Qing?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel trouble brewing. Whenever women become jealous, they are simply irrational. The more peaceful Zhu Ji's appearance is, the angrier she is. In a subservient tone, he meekly replied: "Empress must not be mistaken. Grand Tutor Qin is going to the farms to keep Yanran company. It is not what Empress is thinking."

Zhu Ji stared at him ferociously for some time before turning around. She sighed: "Does Shaolong still wishes to deceive me? As a woman, I know what other women are thinking. Just by her joyful expression, anyone with brains can guess what is going on. Now, Crown Prince and you are both treating me like strangers, right?"

Xiang Shaolong had a strong desire to hug Zhu Ji's voluptuous body into his arms but tried his very best to control himself. He gently comforted: "Empress is thinking too much. The Crown Prince and I are still full of respect for you just like before."

Zhu Ji intimately shook her head: "It is no longer the same! Ai! What wrong did I commit that Heaven must punish me this way? All my men wanted to desert me and now, even my son is disregarding me."

Xiang Shaolong had to agree with her words. First, Lu Buwei gave her to King Zhuangxiang. With his death, she was 'given' to Lao Ai and because of this, Xiao Pan is disregarding her. She may enjoy plenty of power as the Empress but she is certainly not happy.

What else can he say?

Zhu Ji viciously turned around and her expression was frosty. She swore: "Xiang Shaolong. I am utterly disappointed with you. In the future, do not expect me to support you like before."

Xiang Shaolong realised that all her love for him has been transformed into hatred instead. If not for Lao Ai, Zhu Ji would not be so heartless. Lao Ai may appear friendly to him but must be trying to sow discord between him and Zhu Ji. After all, Lao Ai is just a despicable cad.

Unable to hold his anger, he coldly retorted: "Empress is overreacting. Since we met in Handan City, everything I did was for the sake of Empress and Crown Prince. I don't think I deserve your berating."

Zhu Ji blew her top: “How dare you! How dare you use your past achievements to threaten me!”

Blowing his top too, Xiang Shaolong furiously exclaimed: “When did I ever use my past achievements to threaten you? Do I ask you for any special assistance before? Feel free to quote one example!”

Zhu Ji was tongue tied and her face changed colour. She challenged: “Who do you think you are to talk to me in such a manner?”

Xiang Shaolong angrily shot back: “You are the Empress and I am just a lowly official. I am not fit to talk to you. But Empress knows in your heart how I truly feel about you. I am restricted by circumstances and could not betray the late King’s gratitude. Thus, I did not dare to get close to you but you have described me to be an ingrate today. What did I do to deserve this?”

Zhu Ji stared at him with annoyance and her pert breasts are heaving considerably, showing her considerable agitation.

Unwilling to give way, Xiang Shaolong stared back at her and his mind is filled with anger.

After some time, Zhu Ji finally calmed down and lowered her head. She slowly apologised: “I am sorry to throw my temper at you but I am really angry just now.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling guilty too and embarrassedly apologised: “It is my fault for being rude too! Ai! I also do not understand why I lost control of

myself.”

Zhu Ji took three steps forward until they can smell each other’s breaths. Lifting her pretty face, her eyes shone brightly at Xiang Shaolong and she offered: “Shaolong! Can we start all over again? You should know how I feel about you. No matter how you rebut me, I just cannot harden my heart against you.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “What about Official Lao?”

Zhu Ji trembled strongly and her complexion lost colour. Her beautiful dream fantasy has just been shattered and replaced by cold, harsh reality.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that she is deeply involved with Lao Ai and their infatuation is even more intense than Ying Ying’s relationship with Guan Zhongxie. He may feel a sense of relief but he felt a sense of helplessness at the same time.

Zhu Ji’s face lost more colour before regaining her cold and proud demeanour. She nodded: “It is my fault. I heard that you are duelling Guan Zhongxie. If you happen to win, are you going to marry Lu Niang Rong?”

Xiang Shaolong simply replied: “Is Lu Buwei willing to marry her favourite daughter to me?”

Zhu Ji slowly sighed again: “I am tired. Shaolong can take your leave.”

Xiang Shaolong left the palace and quickly galloped back to the Wu

Residence. He and the Guardians hurriedly disguised themselves as commoners and using a secret route, they mysteriously made their way to the meeting point with Tu Xian. In a short while, the two men met again in the empty house.

A pleased Tu Xian started: “Shaolong is brilliant and you managed to kill Mo Ao. Now, Lu Buwei has to depend on me for everything and I am able to have a clearer picture of his schemes.”

His expression turning serious, he continued: “But Shaolong’s biggest mistake is to speak to Meng Ao. This morning, Lu Buwei summoned Wang Ci, Wang Wan and Cai Ze for a discussion. I am sure they will take some action against you soon and I am worried for you.”

Xiang Shaolong apologised first and revealed everything about Wang Ci’s meeting.

Tu Xian was blown away and took some time to finally splutter: “Lady Luck must be smiling on you. It is a gain and a loss for us. You must take safety precautions as Lu Buwei is quite determined to get rid of you. After one plan fails, he will come up with another plan shortly.”

Xiang Shaolong icily smiled: “As long as he does not send the Qin army after me, there is nothing I am afraid of. Housekeeper Tu can rest easy.”

In actual fact, Tu Xian is also confident about Xiang Shaolong’s abilities. He changed the topic: “After you put Guan Zhongxie down during the hunting fair, Lu Niang Rong has been less affectionate towards him. Now, that traitor

and Guan Zhongxie are afraid that she will really fall in love with you. This lass is very spoilt like Ying Ying and her female warriors. Shaolong can consider making use of her and you may even profit from this relationship.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Guan Zhongxie can stoop to such a despicable method but how I can do the same to him?”

His expression turning solemn, Tu Xian apologised: “I am sorry! I forgot that Shaolong is a true gentleman.”

Pausing, he added: “It is a pity that Shaolong has failed to kill Tian Dan this time round. Better luck next time.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Who said so? I caught up to him in Chu and even killed him. It was quite a successful operation.”

Tu Xian was astounded: “How can this be? Yesterday, traitor Lu received a letter from Tian Dan saying that he has safely returned to Qi. They had agreed that when Tian Dan attacked Yan, traitor Lu will attack Han so that Zhao and Wei will be hard-pressed to defend Yan.”

Xiang Shaolong’s body immediately became ice-cold. Once again, he was tricked by Tian Dan.

Tian Dan is indeed a crafty old fox. When he left Shouchun, he must have switched identities with his substitute. Together with Dan Chu, they must have headed back to Qi by travelling on the road. Even Chu was tricked by him and this is the real reason why Tian Dan chose to leave Shouchun

unexpectedly.

The substitute not only resembled Tian Dan and even sounded like him. He is willing to sacrifice himself for Tian Dan and now, Xiang Shaolong has become an idiot who must reverse his name to be Long Shao Xiang.

Tu Xian noticed the change in his complexion and pressed for the details. After Xiang Shaolong has finished explaining, Tu Xian comforted: "There are bound to be some failures in life. Shaolong, you have destroyed the alliance between Qi and Chu and that alone is already a heavy blow to Tian Dan and Lu Buwei. If Li Yuan is smart, he will do his best to obstruct Tian Dan and prevent him from attacking Yan."

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong is beginning to get worried about Shan Rou. There is a chance that she may try to assassinate Tian Dan again and may really end up being killed by him.

Thinking about this, his calm mind became disorderly. Now, he needs to inform Xiao Pan and the others that their mission to kill Tian Dan had failed miserably.

Tu Xian reassured him further and added: "For the past six months, Guan Zhongxie spent two hours every morning and every evening to practise his swordplay. He is ready to conclude his last battle with you. This man's willpower and determination is something that I rarely see in people nowadays. Shaolong, if you lack confidence, you can use the excuse that you do not want to marry Lu Niang Rong to call off the duel. I am sure that no one will dare to speak ill of you."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed to himself. Tu Xian and Ying Ying had proposed the same idea so it is evident that Guan Zhongxie's swordsmanship must have improved tremendously. Thus, both of them are concerned that he may lose the fight and even sacrifice his life.

Although Xiang Shaolong agrees that their concerns are not unfounded, at the same time, he knows that if he shies away from this fight, in the future, he will never be able to raise his head high up again in front of Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie.

Motivated by this thought, he was filled with a strong fighting spirit. Xiang Shaolong smiled: "No! I will win for sure!"

Chapter 10

Stargazing

Back at the Command Centre, he had just finished telling Teng Yi about Tian Dan's survival. Just as Teng Yi's face changed colour, Jing Jun barged in and reported: "Lu Buwei is getting ready to attack the farms and is now deploying his men."

The two men could not be bothered about Tian Dan anymore. They asked in chorus: "How did you know?"

Jing Jun sat down and explained: "Earlier, Meng Tian came secretly to look for me and told me he overheard his father instructing a trusted family warrior to select two thousand men from his family warriors. Together with traitor Lu's family warriors, they will form an army and attack the farms while disguised as horse thieves. None of us is to be spared. Hng! Meng Ao is such a fool. We must not spare him too."

Teng Yi's expression grew serious: "This is not called foolish, this is called cruel. If they succeeded and with Lu Buwei sheltering them, who can lay a finger on them? If the Imperial Cavalry Commander falls under their control, Xianyang City will be their playground. Luckily, we have always been fortifying our defences at the farm and have added a perimeter wall recently. They are still ignorant of our true strength so we still have a fighting chance."

Xiang Shaolong reminded: "Meng Ao is well-versed in warfare and he must

have capable men under his command. Coupled with the thousands of warriors in Lu Residence, they will have double our strength if they attacked with just seven thousand men. If not for Meng Tian's information, we will suffer a huge loss when they attack. Of course it is a different matter now."

Teng Yi's face lost colour: "Not good. This morning, Pu Bu and Liu Chao have led two thousand men towards the Northern Border. We have lesser manpower and it does not bode well for us."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: "What? They left already?"

Teng Yi sighed: "This is Grandmaster Wu's idea as Eldest Brother needs these men urgently. Thus, they made quick preparations and left as early as possible."

Jing Jun suggested: "Why don't we get a few men from the Cavalry Army to help us?"

Xiang Shaolong concluded: "We must never do that. If we have any deployments, that traitor Lu will soon get wind of it. Moreover, our Wu Family Elite Army must not be mixed with outsiders as this will affect our efficiency. We may also put Meng Tian in danger."

Jing Jun nodded: "I nearly forgot to say something. Meng Tian suggested that we run for our lives as he did not expect us to have the ability to face his Dad's army."

Filled with a heroic air, Teng Yi state in a deep voice: "I will return to the farm

immediately to prepare for battle and disperse all our young and womenfolk. Third Brother and Little Jun can return tomorrow and do not cause any unnecessary alarm. You should not fetch Widow Qin to the farm if possible. The crux of this battle is the element of surprise. We must trick the enemy to continue thinking that we are unprepared for them.”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and nodded: “I understand. This time round, we will make Lu Buwei, Meng Ao and Guan Zhongxie take a big tumble.”

Arriving home, Xiang Shaolong told his wives about Tian Dan being alive, Lu Buwei using Wang Ci to ambush him and the imminent attack on the farms. Everyone including Ji Yanran was shaken at this news.

Zhao Zhi’s revenge dream has been shattered. In addition, worrying about Shan Rou’s safety has caused her to lose her appetite and she hid in her room crying.

Xiang Shaolong did his best to comfort her and returned back to discuss further with Ji Yanran and Wu Tingfang.

Ji Yanran sighed: “Tian Dan’s substitute is really remarkable and he imitated his body language and gestures exceedingly well. Even we were tricked!”

Wu Tingfang bitterly smiled: “If the impersonation is lousy, the fake Tian Dan would not be able to deceive so many of us at the hunting fair.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel the hatred swelling up in him. He was thoroughly

deceived by this sly old fox. But Tian Dan's substitution trick is meant for the people of Chu and not him but he was deceived as well. It seems like fate cannot be changed.

Ji Yanran forced herself to brighten up: "Luckily, Uncle Qing has built many new weapons that Xiang Shaolong has invented. We can use this opportunity to test their effectiveness."

Xiang Shaolong recalled his improved weapons and armour and can feel his spirits rising. He was about to speak out when Zhou Wei came in hugging a roll of drawings. Despite her tired look, her eyes are shining with excitement.

Ji Yanran gladly mentioned: "After Little Wei received your instructions, she has been working day and night designing the fake Black Dragon. It seems like she finally has a breakthrough!"

Zhou Wei humbly greeted: "It is all thanks to Madam's guidance."

Xiang Shaolong received the drawings and spread them open. It was a construction plan with many creative designs.

Zhou Wei sat down and began explaining: "This Black Dragon is divided into eighteen sections and one man will operate each section. Just by using their hands, they can form a black dragon which can float and sink as needed. When the dragon is built, the men needed some practice to make sure that everything runs smoothly."

She added: "There is an air bag along the spine of the dragon. When it is

filled with air, the dragon can float or sink as needed. To escape underwater undetected, all you need to do is to burst the air bag after the performance.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and he went through the plans with Ji Yanran and Zhou Wei for another two hours. They thought hard at all the possibilities and made all the improvements before retiring back to bed.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Shan led the Wu Family Elite Warriors who are in the Cavalry Army as well as Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Xiang Bao’er and the Tian sisters back to the farms.

The Imperial Cavalry Army was left in Wu Guo’s charge.

Xiang Shaolong set off earlier and went to fetch Qin Qing with the Eighteen Guardians.

Qin Qing is waiting for him in her residence. When he arrived, she set off immediately and joined his entourage.

This ancient beauty is delicately dressed with a snow white cloak and a thin veil that blocks out the strong wind. Her overpowering charm has Jing Shan and the Guardians totally spellbound.

Riding beside her, Xiang Shaolong forgot all about Lu Buwei’s threat and laughed: “Grand Tutor Qin is especially pretty today!”

Qin Qing nonchalantly replied: “Go ahead and tease me all you like.”

Xiang Shaolong loosened up: “Grand Tutor Qin has a veil on. Are you afraid that we will see your red and embarrassed face?”

Qin Qing has led a chaste live and has never been teased like this. She loudly wailed: “You better behave yourself or I will not speak to you during the journey.”

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and hurriedly swallowed the rest of his words.

Qin Qing charmingly giggled: “So Xiang Shaolong is not as brave as I thought. What did the Empress want with you yesterday?”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: “It seems like nothing escapes your detection within the palace.”

Qin Qing plainly replied: “The Empress is considered to have spent little time within the palace. Her attendants are mainly made up of Lady Hua Yang’s ex attendants so if you dare to do anything deceitful, you cannot escape my knowledge. So far, you have been quite honourable.”

Xiang Shaolong was amused: “Grand Tutor Qin, please forgive me for being rude but I believe it is you who is being deceitful. You have already fallen in love with me but still refused to admit it. Ha!”

Appearing unmoved, Qin Qing mused: “All men loved to brag and Grand Tutor Xiang is of no exception. On this trip, I am just accompanying Yanran, Tingfang and Zhi Zhi. Official Xiang must be mistaken to sprout such

nonsense. Based on this fact, I will not hold it against you but you better watch yourself.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “It seems like I have to resort to force instead.”

Qin Qing shrieked: “You dare!”

The city gates appearing in their view, Xiang Shaolong squeezed Jifeng with his legs and he sped forward, laughing loudly: “I now understand that dating Grand Tutor Qin is so exciting. Thanks for your sharing.”

Out of the city, they met up with Ji Yanran and the rest and continued riding. At night, they finally stopped at a high slope and began building tents and cooking meals, enjoying the wonders of Mother Nature.

The weather is great and the sky is filled with countless stars. The land is covered with shimmering snow and it was a mysterious and breathtaking sight.

Qin Qing appears to be in a great mood and is having a private conversation with Ji Yanran. Once in a while, they will give Xiang Shaolong a mesmerizing look and fill his heart with warmth against the bitter cold.

After dinner, the two mothers Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi went to coax Xiang Bao’er to sleep while Tian Zhen and Tian Feng helped to wash up.

With Ji Yanran and Qin Qing in tow, Xiang Shaolong went to a slope and laid some blankets on the ground. Sitting down, they looked up to the sky and

were lost in the mystifying exquisiteness of the universe.

Xiang Shaolong laid down with Ji Yanran on his left and Qin Qing on his right. Enjoying their fragrances, he was completely inebriated and wished that time can stand still in this moment forever.

After a while, Ji Yanran bypassed Xiang Shaolong and started chatting with Qin Qing. Like the most melodious music, their voices entered his ears.

Funnily, he did not pick up their dialogue and is unwilling to. He is at ease and takes pleasure in hearing their voices just like he is listening to the best musical orchestra.

The bright moon slowly rose above the tree branches and gently shone down on them.

Sounds of the warhorses or humans can be heard occasionally from the top of the slope.

It is absolutely tranquil and peaceful.

Xiang Shaolong let out a comfortable sigh.

Ji Yanran loving looked down at him and softly asked: "A penny for your thoughts?"

Xiang Shaolong stretched out his four limbs and accidentally brushed past Qin Qing's jade legs. He hurriedly shrunk back but Qin Qing had already

trembled slightly and whined sensitively in protest.

Pretending not to hear anything, Ji Yanran wailed: “I am talking to you!”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart nearly melted. He stretched out his hand and gently held onto Ji Yanran’s hand and yearned: “I was thinking that the three of us can sleep here tonight and enjoy this limitless view. We can count the stars and fall asleep counting them. We may even dream of stars in our sleep.”

Qin Qing was thrilled: “How can the sky be unlimited?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “If there is a limit, then there must be a border. But there must be something beyond the border right?”

Her eyes shining with joy, Ji Yanran stared up to the sky and softly remarked: “Hubby’s words are too deep and even I cannot fathom them. Godfather mentioned before, every human is a star that dropped down from heaven. When we die, we will return back to the sky. Isn’t that sweet?”

Xiang Shaolong stared at Qin Qing.

The beauty is staring at the sky and her flawless looks seemed to be part of the attractive sky. Under the moonlight, her face is glowing like a piece of top quality silk. His heart aroused, Xiang Shaolong could not help but stretched his other hand over and held her hand tightly too.

Qin Qing’s body trembled again and she shot him a look. Trying to wrest her hand back, she gave up after two tries and her face began to burn with

passion.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong felt like he owns the entire beautiful star studded sky.

Everything is materializing like a dream.

He remembered the times when he first came to this ancient era and was subjected to numerous sufferings and was bullied by Zhao Mu and other villains. It is all thanks to his strong will and fighting spirit that he managed to cultivate Qin Shi Huang and even won the hearts of these beautiful women. What more can he ask for?

To the people who knew him in the 21st century, he had died a long time ago. Who can guess that he is living a different life two thousand years ago during the warring states period?

Is this a kind of reincarnation? When he really dies, will he be reborn again two thousand years later to travel back again in time to this ancient era? It is all due to the time machine which somehow manages to preserve his age and memory!

Ji Yanran chirped: “Why are the two of you so quiet?”

Qin Qing struggled again and realised that she cannot overcome Xiang Shaolong’s iron grip. She whispered: “I don’t know why but I feel so lazy I do not want to say anything.”

Xiang Shaolong could not help but utter: “This is called: Speaking to your loved one at night, silence can be better than words!”

Both women shook at the same time and lowered their heads to look at him.

Ji Yanran sighed: “These two lines are so poetic and appropriate for this present circumstance. There is no line that is more befitting.”

Qin Qing seems to be moved and held his hand harder instead. She softly pleaded: “Can you say a few more lines for me?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that his literacy is limited and most of his lines are the limited knowledge he gained from his high school Mandarin lessons. He bitterly smiled: “I must have an Inspired Moment and I cannot intentionally create lines whenever I wanted.”

Qin Qing was touched: “Inspired Moment. These four words are already so poetic. Ai! Xiang Shaolong, why is your brain so different from others?”

Ji Yanran laughed: “If Xiang Shaolong is a normal man, Sister Qin will not sit beside him and allowed him to accompany you to sleep while admiring the stars. And you will not blame him for being rude to you.”

Her face turning red immediately, Qin Qing protested: “Sister Yanran, you... When did I agree to accompany him...? I am going to keep quiet.”

Ji Yanran coaxed: “Hubby, do say a few more beautiful lines for Sister Qin. I also wanted to see her moving expression.”

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say 'When the golden wind meets the jade outdoors, it is better than countless moments in man's world' which is what Zhao Ya repeated non-stop before her death. He felt like his heart was being sliced apart by a knife and could not say anything momentarily.

Qin Qing was looking intimately at him and was surprised: "Is Grand Tutor Xiang feeling unwell?"

Xiang Shaolong sat up and took a few deep breaths, suppressing the grief he had over Zhao Ya's death. He shook his head: "It's nothing."

Ji Yanran leaned onto him and gently comforted: "Except for Sister Qin and me, you are not allowed to think of anything else."

Xiang Shaolong emptied his brain of all thoughts and stared at the faraway mountains that were enveloped in moonshine. Like a lost child, he kept nodding his head.

Qin Qing mused: "It would be great if Yanran has her jade flute now."

Ji Yanran smiled: "Now, I only wanted to hear hubby say a few touching sentences. Doesn't Sister Qin?"

Qin Qing loudly complained: "Xiang Shaolong bullying me is bad enough. Now I have to deal with this terrible Talented Lady Ji too."

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and had an inspiration. He chanted: "Is there a pub that cannot make you drunk? Is there a lady who does not pine

for her loved one? What great ability do I have to gain the affections of the two best women on earth and make this bold statement?"

Both women were moved and like two opposing poles of a magnet, their gazes were fixated on his face.

Abruptly, Jing Jun's voice rang out behind them: "I found them!" Following him were Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi who are looking for their hubby, scaring Qin Qing who frantically yank her hand back.

That night, Xiang Shaolong, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng shared a tent, only hugging each other to sleep. Times are precarious and it is inadvisable to indulge in pleasures of the flesh.

Before the sky has yet to brighten, Xiang Shaolong is already fully awake while the Tian sisters are still sound asleep like two cute kittens.

Xiang Shaolong carefully slipped out of the warm blankets and put his cloak on. Feeling his way out of the dark tent, he approached Qin Qing's tent.

Within the pitch black tent, Qin Qing's light breathing can be heard.

But Xiang Shaolong suddenly sensed that something is not right; there are a dagger pointing at his own waist and Ji Yanran's threatening voice can be heard in the darkness: "Who is it?"

Qin Qing's light breathing stopped and she was jolted awake.

Xiang Shaolong was totally humiliated. He whispered: “It is me!”

Ji Yanran chortled and kept her dagger. Leaning into his bosom, she giggled: “I am so sorry and my mistake is unpardonable. I actually spoiled hubby’s grand plan to raid our tent and make love to us.”

Qin Qing may be keeping quiet but Xiang Shaolong wished he could dig a hole and bury his head inside forever.

The sky has just brightened and everyone is occupied with packing their tents.

Qin Qing stayed as far apart from Xiang Shaolong as possible during the journey. Xiang Shaolong is feeling guilty too and he rode ahead with Jing Jun and the rest in the front.

Shortly after noon, they finally arrived at the farms.

There are sentries based on every piece of high ground cum strategic locations and security is extremely tight.

Teng Yi is busy instructing the Wu Family Elite Army to plan obstacles and lay traps near the entrances and exits. Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun went to assist him while Ji Yanran and the other girls returned back to the farm residences.

Teng Yi led the two men on an inspection tour of the farm layout and defences. As he rode his horse alongside them, he explained: “Our farms is enormous and it is impossible to guard against every battle line. Therefore, I

have focused our strength at the courtyard. Because there is nothing specific to guard, I have increase the height and thickness of the perimeter wall and erected more signal towers. I have also laid many traps around the walls and herded most of the animals away. I have left about a hundred animals behind as a decoy.”

By now, they have ridden up a small hill that is overlooking the wide farmlands.

The Hidden Dragon Abode is one of the buildings in the main courtyard. Initially, there were only eighteen buildings but now, there are over sixty buildings. With high walls surrounding each building, it is like a mini city. If the two thousand men were used to defend the two mile perimeter, it will be largely insufficient. Moreover, the enemy would have come prepared; if they focused on one or two main areas to attack, they can overcome the defenders easily.

Xiang Shaolong shared all his observations and finally suggested: “This time, we must use some of the battle strategies from the Mohist Scroll and ‘attack the attackers’. If we can lay an ambush outside the perimeter wall and coordinate our attacks, we will give them the fight of their life.”

Teng Yi frowned: “I thought about this possibility too. The problem is that Meng Ao is attacking us personally and this man is well-versed in warfare. He would not use up all his men in a full attack but will probably base his forces on higher ground and attack us in different waves. Our ambush army will become an isolated army instead and this is disadvantageous for us.”

Xiang Shaolong confidently decided: “In that case, it is the higher ground that we must establish control first.” Pointing to a dense snow forest near a mountain base, he recommended: “If we can build an underground tunnel that goes to that forest from here, we can distract the enemies’ attacking force.”

Jing Jun interrupted: “Without a month or two, it is impossible to build a tunnel like that.”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for his mistake and changed the topic: “In that case, we can build a hidden shelter instead.”

Teng Yi bitterly laughed: “If the shelter can only hide a dozen men or so, it would be fruitless. Moreover, Meng Ao should see through this trick given his battle experience.”

Xiang Shaolong thought even harder and happened to see some smoke rising from the farm chimneys. He had a brainwave and exclaimed: “I got it!”

Both men stared at him in shock.

Looking at the smoke, Xiang Shaolong proudly explained: “We can dig a few holes along the valleys and fill them with oil, firewood and other burning materials. It would be better if there is a bad smell created from the burning. When it is lighted, large amounts of smoke can be produced and some of the smoke will be blown uphill towards the higher ground. When the enemy is thrown into confusion, we shall attack them at the perfect time and I guarantee that their forces will be in total disarray and easily destroyed as a

result.”

Jing Jun and Teng Yi were inspired by his strategy.

Laughing to himself that this is probably the first form of chemical warfare in history, Xiang Shaolong continued: “The enemies will naturally attack at night. As long as we are careful, we can escape after lighting up the smoke pits. We will also have a wet cloth to cover our faces and avoid breathing in any of the smoke.”

Jing Jun excitedly cried: “I know of some trees nearby called Poison Oak. When the wood is being burnt, it produces an extremely foul smell. Let me go and cut some now!” Finishing his words, he rode away at once.

Teng Yi was astonished: “Third Brother is truly creative and wise. In fact, we can set up several of these smoke pits and light up those which are having a favourable wind direction. I shall get some men to prepare these pits now. You should go back and have some rest!”

At dinner time, Teng Yi is still busy with work.

Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang went to the main hall to dine with Wu Yingyuan and his wife while Qin Qing accompanied Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi for dinner in the Hidden Dragon Abode.

When Xiang Shaolong came back, Ji Yanran and Qin Qing are performing a duet with their flute and qin. His musical knowledge is quite shallow but he still enjoyed their playing.

Out of the blue, Ji Yanran suggested that Xiang Shaolong go for a stroll with Qin Qing. Unexpectedly, Qin Qing agreed to her idea too.

Xiang Shaolong is beyond delight and realised that Qin Qing did not really hold it against him for his earlier intrusion and hurriedly accompanied his love out of the Abode.

Chapter 11

The Great Farm Battle

The farms were lighted in many areas and it was as bright as day. The two thousand Elite Wu Family Warriors and several thousand farmhands are busy constructing defence structures, giving top priority to the smoke pits.

It was strangely calm and peaceful within the residences as if no one expects an imminent battle.

Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing are strolling along a gravel path that is linking the several farm buildings. Coming to a well, Xiang Shaolong fetched a pail of water and took two sips. His arteries nearly froze on the spot.

Qin Qing sighed: "Rural living is pleasant indeed. People living in the city are more hypocritical and ruthless."

Xiang Shaolong sat down on the edge of the well and patted the empty space beside him, smiling: "Shall we take a rest?"

Qin Qing smoothly sat down beside him. Lowering her head, she softly asked: "Does Grand Tutor Xiang know why I am willing to accompany you for a private stroll?"

Feeling uncomfortable at a possible confrontation, Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath: "Speak your mind. I can accept anything."

Qin Qing sighed and shook her head: "It is not as bad as you think. I did not hold it against you at all. In actual fact, I could not conceal my feelings too and had to come to the farms with you. As you had mentioned, I have been deceiving myself all these while and suffered the pain of pining for you. But from tonight onwards, I will not be so foolish anymore."

Xiang Shaolong was unexpectedly surprised and intimately scrutinized her matchless beauty. Intoxicated, he trailed: "Grand Tutor Qin is saying that..."

Qin Qing shyly whined: "I am not saying anything. Why are these people working non-stop? Is someone going to attack the farms?"

Xiang Shaolong understands that if he tries to hasten things with Qin Qing, she would despise him. It is totally unforeseen that she would actually lost her inhibitions and offered herself willingly, adding to the excitement of the relationship. Telling himself to be patient, he divulged Lu Buwei's scheme and concluded: "Will Grand Tutor Qin blame me for putting you in danger?"

Qin Qing decisively shook her head: "Of course not! I am delighted because you have finally regarded me as... Ah, it is nothing."

Xiang Shaolong could not help but face the sky and laughed: "Is Grand Tutor Qin trying to say that I have finally regarded you as my woman?"

Qin Qing loudly wailed: "No such thing. Hai! It is your brain and you can think whatever you want."

Xiang Shaolong reached his hand over and held tightly onto her hand.

Standing up, he invited: “Let me introduce you to our battle formation. Otherwise, you may blame me for hiding things from you again.”

Qin Qing struggled shortly and finally accepted the fate of her hand being held by him. She shyly nodded at him first before shooting him a look at his last line, faulting him for bearing old grudges.

Xiang Shaolong’s heart has completely melted and resisted the strong urge to kiss and caress her. He proceeded to lead her on a night tour of the farm.

Back at the Hidden Dragon Abode, Xiang Bao’er has been coaxed to sleep by the nanny while Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi are engaged in a game of chess. The Tian sisters are watching the intense game at the side.

Ji Yanran is analyzing with Uncle Qing on how to build Zhou Wei’s fake black dragon.

Witnessing Xiang Shaolong and Qin Qing’s return, Uncle Qing hurriedly got up and paid his respects.

Ji Yanran scanned Qin Qing’s expression and smiled knowingly at Xiang Shaolong. Qin Qing maintained an innocent look throughout as if nothing has happened.

Qin Qing noticed that although they were staring at each other, she was the centre of attention and quickly left for her room.

Xiang Shaolong joined in their discussion and by the time Uncle Qing has fully

grasped the essence of their needs, Xiang Shaolong took the chance to ask: “Does Uncle Qing knows how to produce firecrackers and pyrotechnics?”

Ji Yanran proudly proclaimed: “Uncle Qing’s forte is in blacksmith works. If you wanted to talk about fire crackers and pyrotechnics, you can start asking me for advice!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “You know about gunpowder and related stuff?”

Ji Yanran smugly replied: “Of course. I know about many other things too. Feel free to test my wisdom!”

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged that her Talented reputation is not without merit. He was thinking of getting Uncle Qing to manufacture a hand gun for his personal protection but decided against it in the end as a hand gun does not have the range of arrows and it is difficult to load gunpowder. He smiled: “Who am I to test you?”

Uncle Qing excused himself and Ji Yanran’s expression turned serious: “Then it is my turn to test you. Go to sleep now and from tomorrow onwards, I shall take up the heavy responsibility of drilling you in spear skills. Before your duel with Guan Zhongxie, hubby must sleep alone and not indulge in pleasures of the flesh.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. Wouldn’t this shatter his beautiful dream of making love to the exquisite and alluring Qin Qing? He protested: “According to studies, love making does not affect the athletes’

performance.”

Ji Yanran was shocked and furrowed her brows: “What are you talking about?”

Xiang Shaolong raised both his hands in mock surrender: “I will obey all your instructions.”

He left with a bitter smile.

For the next five days, Xiang Shaolong got up at cock’s crow and received Ji Yanran’s strict tutoring and even took the initiative to swim in the winter waters in a nearby river. In his free time, he went riding with Qin Qing and his wives and Qin Qing’s favourable impression of him grew by leaps and bounds. She no longer views him as a creature of lust and they became much closer.

Teng Yi busied himself with the farm defences and morale was high among their men. Everyone is gearing up for the big showdown with their enemies.

At the sixth day, there was a heavy snowfall.

Spies reported signs of the invading army vanguard in a dense forest about five miles away.

The atmosphere became very tense immediately.

Leading his three wives and Qin Qing who are all dressed in armour, Xiang

Shaolong is inspecting the surroundings from a high wall. Below him, Uncle Qing is commanding his subordinates to install heavy duty crossbow mechanisms on the city walls.

This new crossbow machines are Xiang Shaolong's latest creations. Using the same principles as machine guns, they can fire twelve arrows in succession and reach a range of over a thousand feet. This range is twice of a normal crossbow and its weakness is that it is not portable. However, as a defensive weapon, there is nothing else more ideal.

Xiang Shaolong projected his vision further away and saw that the surroundings were hazy. It is favourable for the attackers and disadvantageous for the defenders.

Ji Yanran predicted: "The enemies will definitely attack after the snowstorm and this hasty attack will be less efficient as they are lacking rest. Moreover, Meng Ao is an arrogant man and does not view us as worthy opponents. His belittling of us will create opportunities for us to win."

Sure enough, at dawn, spies reported sightings of the enemies from the south eastern direction. There were roughly a thousand attackers with ten odd battling rams used to ram the city walls and gates.

Everyone calmed down and prepared themselves mentally for the incoming attack.

All the warriors and workers retreated back into the city while Jing Jun led five hundred of the Wu Family Elite Warriors to a secret bunker that was built

behind the high grounds.

The remaining one thousand and five hundred Wu Family Elite Warriors are camping at the trenches along the city wall. Another twenty odd farm workers made up of males, females, the old and young are situated around the residences, ready to put out any fires or repel any invaders who have successfully climbed the city wall. The fighting spirit is abundant and the atmosphere is full of battle tension.

To Qin Qing standing beside him, Xiang Shaolong asked: “Are you cold?”

Qin Qing shook her head to indicate that she is not cold and blew out a wisp of white air: “This is the first time I am participating in a battle and maybe it is due to your presence by my side; somehow, I do not have the least fear.”

Xiang Shaolong remembered that her late husband died on the battlefield and took the chance to inquire: “Does Grand Tutor Qin abhor wars?”

Qin Qing took some time to consider her answer and replied with astonishment: “This is the first time somebody asked me such a strange question. In Qin, fighting is a way for the men to showcase their ability and gain the highest honours. But after careful thinking, fighting has caused countless people to lose their countries, their homes, their parents, the spouses and their kids. War causes more hatred. What does Grand Tutor Xiang thinks?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “Although I hate to admit this but fighting seems to be part of human nature. Whether it is fighting between two

countries or two persons, fighting arises from competition as it is human nature to compare and compete. It becomes a case of survival of the fittest but it is actually human greed for more territory or more possessions. Every person is striving to gain more fame, power and wealth by putting down other people. Thinking about this, I could not help but shudder.”

Wu Tingfang moved closer to him and leaned into his arms in daze. She admiringly praised: “Hubby’s words are so true.”

Ji Yanran nodded: “This is the reason why Godfather and I have been praying for the New Saint. Only when the world is united can we enjoy genuine peace and harmony.”

Xiang Shaolong silently stared at the glowing snowflakes that were illuminated by the light of the fire. He recalled something and smiled: “My dear wives, do you all know that I loved Grand Tutor Qin addressing me as Grand Tutor Xiang. If she addresses me as Commander Xiang or Official Xiang, then I know that I am in trouble.”

Qin Qing loudly wailed: “You, why are you always bringing up the past.”

Zhao Zhi poked Qin Qing’s shoulder and teased: “When is Sister Qin going to address him as hubby just like us... hee... you know what I mean!”

Qin Qing was greatly embarrassed but could not bear to blame her. Her face is as red as an apple and she was speechless. Before she could react, the enemies have been sighted.

As Teng Yi had anticipated, the enemies assembled themselves on the high slopes before moving their battling rams and cloud ladders twenty feet away from the perimeter wall, getting ready to attack the farms.

Xiang Shaolong and his wives put on an act of unpreparedness and their men pretended to be flustered and were running around in panic.

Their act of confusion is to draw the enemies nearer.

Ji Yanran smiled: "In defending a city, first, everyone must be united and face death without fear. Next, men must be properly allocated according to their capabilities and teams. Thirdly, you must have sufficient defensive structures and fourth, there must be no lack of food and resources. Our perimeter wall may not withstand the attacks but we have laid many traps around the area which will cover up this weakness. We have also fulfilled the four conditions so I am certain of victory."

Teng Yi came up to them and added: "Yanran is well versed in city defences; we will also need to look at attacks!"

Ji Yanran smiled: "We will have to depend on Little Jun then."

The rumbling sounds of the battle drums filled the air as the attackers started to move the rams nearer. Disguised as horse thieves, they attacked from four routes.

Teng Yi laughed: "Meng Ao is trying to trick us by making a frontal attack and taking away our attention. The real attacking force should be coming from

the back. Let's play along with him."

Before he finished speaking, a loud crash was heard. One of the battling rams has fallen into a trap along with several men and horses and it was a sorry sight.

The traps were all within range of the crossbow machines. Teng Yi shouted an order and the arrows fell like rain. The enemy vanguard of one thousand men were shot down mercilessly as another battling ram fell into another trap that was filled with sharp knives.

The battle drums sounded again and it was followed by war cries from the left and the back. The war has finally begun.

Stones from catapults and flying balls of fire were crisscrossing in the air.

Due to the long range of the crossbow machines and their higher position, every single enemy soldier was killed before they can even come near to the perimeter wall.

For two whole hours, only two battling rams managed to reach the base of the perimeter wall but were smashed to smithereens by the catapulted rocks.

Occasionally, some fire arrows were shot into the city but were swiftly extinguished.

Everyone knew that if the wall is breached, it will be a serious disadvantage

so everyone is doing their utmost best to fight. The blood of the enemy soldiers is flowing like a river and the plains were scattered with corpses.

By now, the enemies have laid wooden planks over the traps and are using giant shields to protect their bodies. Advancing with the remaining five battling rams, they advanced rapidly.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the time is ripe and gave his order. The trumpets sounded his order over the entire compound.

About ten of the smoke pits started to emit thick smoke. With the wind carrying them, they were blown in the direction of the attackers outside the city and also those who are based on the high slopes. The enemies begin to break down and cough incessantly.

Teng Yi roused the Elite Army and motivated them to fight even harder.

Xiang Shaolong separately kissed the cheeks of Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi, instructing them to stay within the city. He then came to Qin Qing.

Qin Qing's face is totally red and she turned her face to one side, awaiting a kiss from him.

Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong used his hand to prop her chin and lifted her face, kissing her heavily on the lips. With a broad smile, he left with Teng Yi and Ji Yanran.

As the thick smoke is subsiding, loud shouts of killing and arrows firing can be

heard from the high slope. Apparently, Jing Jun and his men are now attacking the enemies with arrows.

At the main door, one thousand Elite Wu Family Warriors are already mounted on their horses and waiting patiently for Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Ji Yanran. When the three of them mounted their horses, thunderous drumming filled the air and their army marched out neatly before erupting into ruthless slaughtering of their foe. Using the safe paths that were not booby-trapped, they cut into the enemies' formation like a sharp cleaver.

With the Flying Dragon spear and shield, Xiang Shaolong led the pack and killed everyone he saw. The enemy soldiers who have lost their fighting will due to the smoke are barely able to resist his overpowering attacks.

The Elite Warriors displayed their fearsome attacking power. Everyone was fighting their best and like a tiger among a herd of sheep, the enemy formation was broken and they continued their killing spree up the high slope.

By this time, the enemies on the slope are in complete disarray thanks to the choking smoke and Jing Jun's attacks. Coupled with this new attacking force upon them, the attackers could not take it anymore. Demoralised, everyone is only trying their best to escape in all directions.

The city gates opened again and it was another army of three hundred Elite Warriors led by Wu Yan Zhu. Timing their attacks, they killed numerous enemies on the lower ground. In a pathetic state, all the invaders are now only concerned about escaping and staying alive.

Xiang Shaolong met up with Jing Jun's forces and they continued chasing and killing more enemies for another twenty miles before returning back to the farm.

It was a complete rout. Over two thousand enemies were killed and more than two hundred were imprisoned. On their side, there were only thirty one dead and less than two hundred injured. It was a significant win but Xiang Shaolong could not find any joy. For a peace loving man like him, wars, death and injuries are not something he can derive any joy from.

When the sky has brightened, the Wu Family Warriors came out to survey the damage and clean up the area. Jing Jun is put in charge of sending the prisoners of war back to Xianyang City and create some trouble for Lu Buwei.

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong surveyed the aftermath and lamented: "Too bad we did not capture Meng Ao or Guan Zhongxie. Otherwise, Lu Buwei will surely be implicated."

Xiang Shaolong knew better than anyone that before Xiao Pan's coronation, Lu Buwei cannot be toppled. He let out a long sigh and did not reply.

Teng Yi added: "Those captured are either Meng Ao or Lu Buwei's family warriors. Let's see how he explains himself."

Xiang Shaolong replied in a deep voice: "Don't underestimate him. I am sure he has a ready solution. This matter will only come to a rest."

Two days later, they received their answer.

Jing Jun sent someone to report that when they arrived at Xianyang City, they were detained by Guan Zhongxie at the City gates. Lu Buwei came personally and took over the prisoners, promising to punish them severely and find out the true mastermind. Based on Lu Buwei's strong influence, it is hard for Xiao Pan to interfere and the end result is meaningless.

Earlier, Jing Jun has been reminded by Xiang Shaolong and submitted Talented Lady Ji's report to Wang He who in turn, submitted it to Left Premier Lord Changping. Lord Changping then reported the whole incident to Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan during the morning court.

The report was powerful in the sense that it did not pinpoint Lu Buwei as the main perpetrator but hinted at his involvement every now and then.

No matter how daring Lu Buwei is, he will not dare to invade the farms in near future.

Xiang Shaolong is working especially hard today at his spear techniques because Qin Qing woke up early specially to see him practice.

Pi! Pi! Pak! Pak! For the first time, he forced Ji Yanran to fight with all her might to match his attacks.

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has caused his beloved Talented Lady Ji to fight her best and broke out into laughter. Retrieving his spear, he stood upright in an imposing manner just like a heavenly general.

Wu Tingfang, Qin Qing and the other girls are clapping so hard their palms

hurt. Ji Yanran was pleased: “Hubby is really formidable. In a few days, you have understood the essence of spear techniques. I submit to you.”

Teng Yi came up to them and was holding a long sabre that Uncle Qing has just forged. He laughed loudly: “Second Brother is here to test your spear skills using this new sabre Uncle Qing has forged for you. Shaolong must be careful. The sabre has chromium alloy which is invented by you. I have tried using it to sever several spears in succession and the wear and tear is insignificant.”

Ji Yanran is naturally curious and attracted to new things; moreover, it is something her own hubby created. She quickly received the long sabre from Teng Yi and scrutinized it carefully. After some time, she sighed: “This is the best weapon during a cavalry battle (fighting on horseback). I cannot understand how hubby managed to think of such a creative weapon. On the battlefield and charging at the enemy with a sword, one has to utilise the arm strength to hit the enemy as the horse speed is too fast. You cannot just pierce your sword forward. In this case, a sword is not very effective although both sides of the sword are sharp. Additionally, the sword is a narrow weapon and only the sword centre is thick enough to be effective. With this sabre, it is easy to cut down at the enemy as it is sharp on one side and thick on the back. It is a durable weapon which is good for hacking enemies and uses less strength for the same blow. Oh. I must also get Uncle Qing to forge another sabre for me to play.”

Xiang Shaolong was speechless at her observations.

He wanted a sabre from Uncle Qing as he had always admired the samurai

katana of the Japanese. He did not expect the weapon to be so formidable.

Wu Tingfang received the sword from Ji Yanran and admired it. After taking a closer look, she exclaimed: "This sabre has very nice engravings on it. Ah, it even has a name inscribed here: Hundred Battles. Hundred Battles, Hundred Victories. It is a lucky name. Ah! This sabre is so heavy!"

Teng Yi explained: "Uncle Qing's forging method is Yue's secret 'Hundred Forges' method. The weapon is forged over many rounds and subjected to intense fire. It is definitely much superior to a common sabre."

To Ji Yanran, he smiled: "If Yanran wants another sabre like this, you have to wait for a year but the sabre may not be as good as this Hundred Battle Sabre. This is Uncle Qing's masterpiece. He has failed countless times before he was finally enlightened to forge this heavenly weapon. All right, Shaolong come!"

Everyone was excited and hurriedly retreated.

Among the falling snowflakes, Teng Yi raised the sabre and stood in an impressive pose.

Xiang Shaolong let out a roar and the Flying Dragon spear sprang into life into mid air and agilely advanced towards Teng Yi's chest area.

Teng Yi understands that Xiang Shaolong is afraid to injure him because of his longer weapon and chided: "Are you lacking confidence in me? Show me your best moves!"

Wu Tingfang was affected by Teng Yi's air of righteousness and loudly cheered for Xiang Shaolong. Even Qin Qing is cheering loudly for him, showing that she has adapted to Xiang Shaolong's household and lifestyle.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and adopted the horse stance, his long spear striking towards Teng Yi's belly like lightning.

Only with such a long weapon can he attack from such an angle as it is hard for the sabre to deflect the long spear.

Teng Yi coldly snorted and slashed down with the Hundred Battle Sabre.

Xiang Shaolong changed from a piercing attack to a hooking attack. Dang! He failed to hook the Hundred Battle Sabre. He quickly retrieved the spear to protect himself. In the midst of his movement, Teng Yi dashed forward to attack him and Xiang Shaolong blocked with his spear. In a short span of time, they have exchanged many blows.

The first time the sabre and spear come into contact, the spear was heavily deflected. If the Flying Dragon Spear is not made of the best steel but ordinary wood, it would be broken into many pieces by now.

By now, the Eighteen Guardians and Shan Lan have heard the commotion and are busy cheering for them and it was a lively scene.

After another heavy blow, both men retreated and showed signs of tiredness.

Ji Yanran clapped loudly: "This is a match with no clear winner. As long as Second Brother practices more with the sabre and gain more experience, the loser will be our undefeated Xiang Shaolong for sure."

Xiang Shaolong looked up to the sky and had a long laugh. Throwing his spear away, he cheered: "I think I am not using the spear anymore. Next month, I will use the Hundred Battle Sabre to take Guan Zhongxie's life."

Teng Yi joyfully passed him the sabre and wished: "I wish Shaolong will fight and win a hundred battles and be invincible under the skies."

Xiang Shaolong received the treasure sabre and tested its weight, praising: "This sabre is nearly as heavy as my Mozi Sword but it looks much lighter from its appearance. This will catch Guan Zhongxie by surprise and make him regret for duelling with me."

Teng Yi laughed: "From today onwards, your Mozi Sword is mine. After using the Hundred Battle Sabre, all other weapons other than the Mozi Sword is uninteresting."

Both men exchanged a look and laughed loudly. On the side, Ji Yanran just received a report from Wu Guang and happily chirped: "Wu Guang just reported that a giant hot spring has been discovered at Moon Prayer Cliff. Let's go there immediately."

Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng cheered in unison.

Xiang Shaolong was astounded: "Are we skipping practice today?"

Smiling sweetly and charmingly, Ji Yanran gently coaxed: “With this indomitable Hundred Battle Sabre, what’s wrong with taking a day off?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his confidence rising. At the end of the day, he managed to survive until today is because of his knowledge that spans across two thousand years. This sabre he is holding in his hand is the best proof.

Chapter 12

Love Wish Granted

Among the rising heat, the entire rock pool is bathing in warmth. Coupled with the snowflakes falling from the sky, it is heaven on earth.

The boiling spring water sprang out from three cervices in the rock wall and flowed straight into the pool. Any excess water continued to flow to another rock pool five feet below, forming another soaking area. Jing Shan and the other Guardians are congregating in that pool.

On Moon Prayer Cliff, at this inaccessible location, all earthly rules no longer matter. Ji Yanran, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen, Tian Feng all revealed the glory of the beautiful bodies and were soaking contentedly in the hot spring. None of them are willing to leave, for in this ancient era where hot water showers are unavailable; there is no better treat for their bodies in the middle of winter.

Qin Qing removed her shoes and soaked her delicate feet into the spring water. To her, that is as far as she would go.

Xiang Shaolong and the girls stared at her with embarrassment. Sitting down beside her and soaking his feet too, he offered: "Does Grand Tutor Qin wants to soak the spring water too? I can join the boys down there."

Qin Qing resisted the temptation of the spring water and shyly shook her

head: "Grand Tutor Xiang can go ahead and enjoy himself. I am very happy where I am."

Xiang Shaolong noticed that her face is slightly reddish, making her even more mesmerizing. He teased: "Are you not afraid to see me naked?"

Qin Qing knows that this man is intentionally teasing her and she wailed: "Get into the pool quickly. I will not be bothered with you anymore today. I have yet to settle the last score with you!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that she is referring to the incident where he kissed her on the lips. Without any concern for her feelings, he leaned over to kiss her face and embraced her in a bear hug. Just as Qin Qing is about to struggle, both of them slipped and fell right into the hot spring.

Ji Yanran and the other girls swam over, cheering, giggling and teasing them. Among the falling snowflakes, there are no more barriers between them.

After dinner, while Qin Qing and the other girls are playing with Xiang Bao'er, Ji Yanran dragged Xiang Shaolong to a small pavilion in the garden to do snow-watching. She cooed: "I have never seen Sister Qin so happy before. Are you ready to marry her officially?"

Xiang Shaolong thought for a minute and replied: "I think we should discuss this after my duel with Guan Zhongxie!"

Ji Yanran suggested: "I have thought about it already. The best time is after the appearance of the Black Dragon. That is the best time for changes,

including a change in Sister Qin's status. It will not arouse the displeasure of the royal family."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Yanran is thoughtful indeed. With Sister Qin, I have no other wants."

Ji Yanran seriously state: "To get Sister Qin to marry you is not easy. You better treat her like a respectable lady. Ai. I am talking about making love. Sister Qin hates the custom of Qin girls having pre martial sex. Hubby should understand what I mean!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "Now, I dare not even touch you; why would I even dare to think about doing anything to her?"

Ji Yanran giggled: "It is fine to make love once or twice before the duel as long as you curb your desires."

Xiang Shaolong was delighted and held Ji Yanran's hands, sighing: "You must have understood my agony to grant me this special pardon."

Ji Yanran gently replied: "It must be the hot spring's effects. But the one sharing your bed tonight should not be me. Since I am the one who set this rule, I should be the last one to make love with you."

Among the giant snowflakes, Xiang Shaolong held tightly to the Hundred Battle Sabre and is standing alone in the middle of the snowy plains. Behind him are the Wu Family farms.

It may be due to the wonderful feeling of this new weapon that the sabre has never left his side for the past ten days. He is trying to inculcate the three Ultimate Stances of Mozi into the sabre play. After a round of meditation, his heart is still as choppy as the sea. He seems to be on the verge of having a breakthrough on the sabre skill but something seems to be lacking.

During his meditation, he had memory flashes of his past. When he recalled the scenes of the tragic deaths of Zhao Qian and the maids, hot blood surged up in his body and he could not suppress it anymore.

Brandishing his sabre, he sliced ferociously through the air at an invisible opponent.

The sabre rang out loudly as it cuts through empty air.

He suddenly felt at ease and naturally exhibited the Mozi Swordplay but this time, he focused on slashing and chopping moves. Somehow, there is still something missing.

Out of a sudden, he had a brainwave and finally understood the crux of the problem.

He remembered that the Mozi Swordplay focuses on defence rather than attack but the nature of the Hundred Battle Sabre is to attack and not to defend. Therefore, when he tried to inculcate the Mozi Swordplay into the sabre play, it doesn't feel right.

Thinking about this, he quickly forgot about the Mozi Swordplay and focused

on attacks. Among the flashing of the sabre energy, he can feel his forceful attacks striking forward just like bolts of lightning, giving him a strong dose of endorphin.

The tremendous impact of the sabre flashes can be felt all around him.

Like a solid mountain, Xiang Shaolong stood erect but his mind is filled with countless giant waves.

He thought about karate and Chinese wushu which are all based on science and logic, such as attacking using the shortest distance between you and the opponent or using momentum, flow and gravity to your advantage. He even thought about ranged attacks. From all these knowledge, he tried to incorporate the essence into sabre play.

He also thought hard about samurai katana moves. Although it only has a few basic essential moves, every one of them is strong and powerful.

Thinking till here, his sword skills and sabre skills seems to merge into one.

Since Mozi can created his own swordplay and he himself has learnt the essence of his skills, why can't he create his own set of skills by taking the essence of all the martial arts he knew? Xiang Shaolong can feel the boundless of his heart and he was so touched hot tears begin to pour down his face. Facing the sky, he let out a long roar and the Hundred Battle Sabre is now flashing in a maelstrom that has seemed to envelope him.

Following the shadow of the sabre strikes, Xiang Shaolong executed a few

intricate strokes and can feel the might of a million strong soldiers and war horses in his heart. He felt a sense of invincibility and fearlessness regardless of the future.

He kneeled down in an instant, knowing that he has fully grasped the intricacies of sabre play. All he lacks now is experience.

Back home, he promptly looked for Teng Yi and Ji Yanran to test out his new skills.

Holding the Flying Dragon Spear, Ji Yanran saw Xiang Shaolong posing with his sabre and was stunned: “Hubby, what happened to you? The moment you stood there exhibiting your sabre pose, I can already sense that there is no way I can even attack you successfully.”

Laughingly, Xiang Shaolong bellowed: “This is called confidence and might. Come my dear, my hands are itching already.”

Glancing at his natural heroic aura, Qin Qing and all the girls are fully intoxicated.

Letting out a shrill cry, the Flying Dragon Spear came alive in Ji Yanran’s hands. Like endless waves of strong currents, the spear dashed forward towards Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong brightened up. His strength, hands, eyes and footsteps are in perfect synchronicity. Using the Hundred Battle Sabre, every move is used with the appropriate strength, not too much and not too little. Instead of

defending as before, he is now mainly focused on attacks. He met the attack head on, appearing to disregard the weight or length of the Flying Dragon Spear.

Under the strong pressure of the formidable sabre attacks, the Flying Dragon Spear was forced back several times. Talented Lady Ji could not retaliate at all.

Ji Yanran sensed that there is no way she can overcome him. Throwing the spear aside, she retreated and wailed: "I quit!" Turning happy in an instant, she pledged: "Xiang Shaolong, today, I, Ji Yanran, fully submit to you."

Without any warning, Teng Yi leapt over and the Mozi Sword swung towards Xiang Shaolong with tremendous impact.

Xiang Shaolong enthusiastically let out a roar and met the attack head on.

On the surface, his counter attack looked ordinary but underneath, its angle and direction is the best possible position available, giving everyone present a sense of grandmastery.

Even with Teng Yi's amazing arm strength and the weight of the heavy Mozi Sword, he was forced to take half a step back.

Teng Yi can feel his exhilaration rising too. When he was about to retaliate, Xiang Shaolong followed up with another two strikes. Trailing the cold sabre energy, Teng Yi felt helpless and overpowered, taking five continuous steps back in order to counter his two strikes.

Taking advantage of this window, Xiang Shaolong carried on delivering one mighty slash after another. The aura of his indomitable sabre attacks caused everyone including the girls and the Guardians to feel their hearts turning cold.

Teng Yi is a worthy opponent after all. Only after meeting another ten blows did he take another two steps back.

Xiang Shaolong retrieved his sabre and retreated but he still retained his aura of dominance.

Teng Yi laughed loudly: "If Third Brother has the intention to take my life, I am afraid I will be dead or severely maimed."

Jing Shan was flabbergasted: "What kind of sword play is that?"

Xiang Shaolong solemnly state: "It is not sword play, it is sabre play!"

Talented Lady Ji agreed: "This is Shaolong's creation: Hundred Battle Sabre Play. It is more powerful than Mozi Swordplay. Guan Zhongxie is in trouble!"

Amidst their cheering, everyone went back to the houses.

Knock! Knock! Knock! Qin Qing's melodious voice sang out from within the room: "Who is it?"

Xiang Shaolong dryly coughed: "It is me. Can I come in?"

Qin Qing answered: “Yes, oh, no!”

Xiang Shaolong has already barged in. He was curious: “Why did Grand Tutor Qin first said Yes and then said no? Hey, what are you doing?”

Qin Qing stood up from her seat on the floor rug. Her bedroom has a stove on so it is as warm as Spring. She is dressed in an ordinary white dress with a lake green singlet. Coupled with her exquisite face, she resembled a heavenly angel.

On the floor are several pieces of protective plates. Most of them are square but there are also some rectangular and triangular pieces. There are small holes along the edges and Qin Qing is busy sewing them together. She appears to be sewing an armoured vest and the front part is already completed. There are another thirty odd pieces on the floor that has yet to be sewn.

Her petite face turning red, Qin Qing was furious: “Aren’t you out for archery? Why did you come back so soon?”

Noticing the plates on the floor, Xiang Shaolong came to her side and smiled: “Aren’t these Uncle Qing’s protective plates? Hey, Grand Tutor Qin must be weaving an armoured vest for me, isn’t it?”

Even the root of her ears has become red. Nodding, Qin Qing tried to wriggle her way out: “I am pretty free compared to the rest. Tingfang and Zhi Zhi have to manage Bao’er and Yanran is occupied with the Black Dragon construction, so I tried to find something to do to pass the time. Ai, can you

stop staring at me in such a manner?” Lowering her head, she added: “Do you realise that this is my bedroom?”

Xiang Shaolong relished: “It is fortunate that I did not treat this place like a forbidden ground, otherwise, I will not have seen Grand Tutor Qin’s dedication to me. In the future, when I put on the vest, it is like... Hey! It is like Grand Tutor Qin...”

Qin Qing stomped her foot: “Can you please stop saying anymore?”

Xiang Shaolong’s heart is as sweet as honey. He gently asked: “When I barged into the Qin Residence the other day, you hid the embroidery that you were sewing, I wonder...”

Qin Qing embarrassedly walked away and stopped at the window with her back to him. She lowered her head in silence, and silence means that she is indeed sewing something for him.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his pulse racing. Going to her back, he hardened his heart and grabbed her chiselled shoulders.

Qin Qing trembled for a while before calming down. Amazingly, she did not put up any struggle.

Xiang Shaolong leaned forward and pressed onto her smooth cheek and inhaled her fragrance deeply, gently reminiscing: “I can still remember the first time I saw you. It was right outside the Crown Prince’s study. We were both reprimanded by you and we are like complete idiots. From then on, my

respect and love for you is like an immortal.”

Under his warm teasing, Qin Qing’s body softened and leaned backwards into his arms. She moaned: “Your words are really unique. Complete Idiot. Like an immortal. I am only doing what is right but the two of you are clowning around, causing me to lose my temper. I nearly died of anger then.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel her tender back against his own body and he was enveloped in her fragrance. His two eyes feasted on her peerless face, he thought about her virginity and was in ecstasy. His courage grew by leaps and bounds and he proposed: “Grand Tutor Qin, will you be my wife?”

Qin Qing’s body shook strongly. First, her eyes shone with delight before they darkened again. She shook her head.

His hands and feet turning cold at once, Xiang Shaolong was shocked: “You do not want to marry me?”

Qin Qing had a fright too: “No, Ai, don’t jump to conclusions. If I am unwilling to marry you, I will not have come to the farms with you. I am only concerned about you. For the past few years, there have been countless marriage proposals from many members of the royal family as well as high ranking officials. They have all been rejected with the same excuse: I have no more intention to remarry. If I change my mind and marry you, it will incur much jealousy among them. Even though they are unable to prevent us from marrying, they will act unfavourably against you. You must not forget Empress Ji. She seems to have guessed our relationship!”

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief and proudly proclaimed: “Let them say or do whatever they want. When have I been afraid of anyone?” Turning her around, he hugged her tightly. The sensation of feeling her soft bouncy breasts and their legs entangled together is something that cannot be described in words.

Qin Qing opened her mouth and began panting slightly. Her eyes are half-closed, adding to her unparalleled charm.

The number one beauty of Qin forced her eyes open and declared: “Shaolong, if you really head to the borders one day, by hook or by crook, I must go with you. But please do not incur the public’s wrath because of me. Ai, since I have come all the way here, I have already regarded you as my hubby, Ah!”

Xiang Shaolong greedily kissed her and allowed her to enjoy the unreserved pleasure of intimacy of a love relationship. By the time they stopped kissing, the usually strong-willed woman has completely melted in his arms. Her arms proactively embraced his well-built neck and her body is soft but burning with passion.

The flames of love are burning stronger than ever.

Qin Qing whispered into his ear: “Let’s act normally on the surface but behind closed doors, you can do whatever you want, all right? Ah!”

How can Xiang Shaolong hold it any longer? Carrying Qin Qing up in both arms, he walked towards her bed.

By the time Xiang Shaolong woke up, it is already dark outside.

Qin Qing's voluptuous figure is still intertwined with his body.

Xiang Shaolong fondled her again and Qin Qing is awakened by his touches. Discovering Xiang Shaolong's caress, she remained submissive. Just when things are getting interesting, she suddenly sat upright and revealed the top half of her flawless body, wailing: "Oh no, it is all your fault. We have missed dinner. How am I going to face Yanran and the rest in the future?"

Xiang Shaolong cheerfully sat up and hugged her, coaxing: "It is normal for people to fall in love. Who dares to make fun of our Grand Tutor Qin? Come, let me help Grand Tutor get dressed. I am the one who undressed you so I should also be the one who dressed you"

Qin Qing may have made love to him but still cannot stand his teasing. She demanded: "Get out of my room and check out what is happening outside. Come back and report to me as soon as possible."

Xiang Shaolong accepted her order and jumped out of bed. He hurriedly got dressed and came back shortly. Qin Qing is sitting in front of the bronze mirror tidying up her hair. Xiang Shaolong seized her hand: "There is no need to comb any further. I love to see you with your hair and clothes in a mess. Moreover, everyone has gone to sleep. Only the Tian sisters are waiting to serve us. I have instructed them to bring dinner to us so you need not expose yourself outside."

Right this moment, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng came in with a knowing smile.

After setting up dinner, they left. Qin Qing let out a cry and fell into Xiang Shaolong's arms, complaining: "Shaolong, you have really gotten me into trouble!"

Xiang Shaolong was surprised: "What did I do?"

Her eyes filled with numerous emotions, Qin Qing shyly replied: "Without you by my side in the future, my days will be full of sorrow!"

Xiang Shaolong helped her up and supported her up. He shook his head: "A short parting is sweeter than marriage. This is how deep our love is."

Qin Qing was in a daze and repeated 'a short parting is sweeter than marriage' a few times before sighing: "No wonder even with Yanran's talent, she still has to submit to you. Hubby's words are the most pleasing to the ear."

Feeling guilty, Xiang Shaolong gently asked: "Shall I feed you?"

Qin Qing nodded her head. What followed was a night of love and passion.

For the next ten odd days, Xiang Shaolong controlled his desires and spent all his time practising his sabre play, making huge progress.

On this day, he dragged the Guardians out to be his sparring partners. After he has defeated all of them soundly, Ji Yanran secretly got everyone to a location outside the farm.

At the riverside, everyone stopped their horses. She started: "Recently, a black dragon has been sighted along this river. Is hubby brave enough to kill this beast and save the people?"

Besides her, Teng Yi chortled: "If the dragon is really destroyed, Uncle Qing will strangle every one of you here."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "The Black Dragon has been completed?"

Qin Qing shouted: "Look!"

Everyone followed her line of sight and saw a strange head surfacing from below the water. With lights shining from its eyes, it was followed by several metres of the dragon body surfacing. It is a chilling scene.

However, within a minute, before the dragon can swim closer, it has already broken into two.

Ji Yanran cursed: "Those fools!"

The black dragon has now broken up into several pieces. As the river is filled with air bubbles, the men operating the dragon frantically surfaced and swam towards shore.

Wu Tingfang and the others are laughing so hard they nearly fell down from their horses.

Holding back his own laughter, Teng Yi assured: "There is no need to fret. It is

just some minor engineering issue. The weather is too cold too. They should be fine after a few more practices.”

Xiang Shaolong is already very satisfied with the demonstration. After praising Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong turned his horse towards the direction of home and sighed: “These time spent back at the farms are so carefree and joyful. Thinking that I have to go back and face that smelly Premier Mentor, I don’t have any appetite anymore.”

Teng Yi mused: “Little Jun is the exact opposite. He is so unwilling to stay here at the farms.”

Wu Tingfang laughed: “Of course. Without Lu Dan’er, what joy is there for him!”

Ji Yanran enquired: “There is another ten days till Lu Buwei’s birthday. When is hubby returning?”

Xiang Shaolong thought for while and decided: “The day after tomorrow!”

Qin Qing reminded: “We must take precautions in case Lu Buwei sets an ambush for us along the way.”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “The possibilities may not be high but you are right. It is better to be safe than sorry.”

Teng Yi proudly state: “I have already made arrangements. This trip back to Xianyang City will be without hassle. I have sent men to monitor the roads so

safety is not an issue.”

Zhao Zhi smiled: “This time, I must also go and watch hubby fight and kill Guan Zhongxie that b@sterd.”

Wu Tingfang clapped her hands in agreement.

Ji Yanran frowned: “What if Lu Buwei really decided to marry her daughter to you? What shall we do?”

Qin Qing smiled: “This is why Lu Buwei sent his men to attack the farms. He has his own fears too. Lu Buwei is also afraid that Guan Zhongxie will lose too. Thus, even if Shaolong wins, Lu Buwei will never marry his daughter to him.”

Slapping his horse forward, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Who cares what will happen? Most importantly, we must kill Guan Zhongxie first. We will solve whatever problem that comes along the way.”

With their fighting spirit at their peak, everyone slapped their horses and gave chase, leaving a long trail of horse tracks on the snow grounds. After gaining the Hundred Battle Sabre, Xiang Shaolong has no more fear of anyone anymore.

End of Book 17